

# Walking. Sensing. Participation

## Three Meditations for Experiential Computing

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# WALKING. SENSING. PARTICIPATION: THREE MEDITATIONS FOR EXPERIENTIAL COMPUTING

*Complete research*

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## Abstract

*This paper uses three meditations to contemplate walking, sensing and participation as three ways with which we can extend the notion of 'experiential computing' proposed by Yoo (2010). By using the form of meditations, loosely associated concepts that are part introspective and part 'causative', i.e. aimed as some form of change in perspective within Information Systems Research, the paper weaves empirical incidents from fieldwork with theoretical concepts on movement, sensuality, and embodiment, suggesting directions for methodologies and techniques to be pursued if experiential computing is intended to also inform the design of technologies for the future. By emphasizing the senses and the body and their importance to an extended notion of sensory apprenticeship (Pink, 2009), the paper suggests alternative routes to knowing and representation in IS related fieldwork.*

*Keywords: embodiment, meditation, walking, participation, design, mobilities*

## 1 Exposition

This paper consists of three meditations. Notably, they are meditations 'for' something, rather than 'on' something. The reader will know the difference. Suffice to say that in this sense, the meditations are meant as tools to occasion a change of perspective on the idea and practice of experiential computing research. The overall aims of the paper are first, by way of the somewhat unusual format of the meditation, to contemplate how researchers can engage with sensory and embodied experiences into scholarly work. Secondly, the aim is to show how sensory representations, i.e. ways in which to participate in, and relate, experiential worlds may extend how we explore, understand and participate in *experiences* in experiential computing (Yoo, 2010). My proposition is that embodiment in Information Systems research can be positioned as fundamental quality of fieldwork that aims to inform and inspire participatory design work. By reflecting on (non)-representations and conceptualizations of the body in Information Systems (IS) and design work, the paper opens different vectors for how IS can shift its attention and broaden its relevance in the shaping of possible futures of Information Technologies (ITs) for people.

The meditations should be read as three different *overtures* or openings to think about the living, sensing body. The meditations, and the scholarly reflections that frame them, are fluid, struggling, and open-ended. In no way are they complete or sufficiently inclusive for a fuller understanding of a sensory and embodied perspective on IS and design work. Indeed, it might be argued that 'full and complete' would go against the very nature of practical meditations. However, the meditations I have included in this paper are chosen to indicate some possible itineraries for embodied and sensory scholarship within a broader theme of experiential IS research (Yoo, 2010). In particular, I suggest that if we are to make IS research truly 'experiential', we must also broaden and multiply the foundations and conceptual grounds for the empirical research we do and the representations that emerges from such research. In more than one way, my somewhat conceited motto is '*back to the ground*'. Yet it feels inappropriate to invoke those grand, arrogant 'turns' of philosophical or disciplinary consequence that occasionally propose to recast a way of thinking, a school of thought or a learned

discipline in a new conceptual or theoretical form. In this paper, I have more humble aims. Let us simply say; ‘to the ground’ and retain a certain confidence that a trajectory that points down to the feet, to moving about, and to the sensing, affective body, and ‘felt life’ (Wright and McCarthy, 2010) will have some resonance with at least some of the ‘tribal groups and territories’ (Tribe, 2010) of IS research.

## 1.1 Grounding

Research fields such as communications and media studies maintains a long tradition of conceptualizing the sensing, affective body and embodied identities alongside apparently ‘disembodied’ practices such as on-line communications, notably Stones (1992) seminal paper on boundaries, tensions and transitions of embodiment in cyberspace, Campbell’s (1994) engaged participation in on-line gay chats, Turkle’s (1994) work on off- and on-line gender identities in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), as well as Hayles’ (1999) reading of the legacy of cybernetics in the conceptualization of a disembodied, informational self. More recent work includes Paasonen’s work on affect and online pornography (Paasonen, 2011). Studies in the area of practice-led research as well as arts and design-based research has been instrumental in foregrounding embodiment in artistic and designerly work as well as in the research process (e.g. Scrivener and Zheng 2012, Stolterman 2008, Stolterman, McAtee, Royer, and Thandap 2008). In particular, studies such as these have performed and represented practices without the presumption of verbal, informational identities as somehow more reliable or consistent than the whole living, moving body. Yet, that living, mobile, experiential, affective body is, with some exceptions (e.g. McGrath, 2006, Thompson, 2012), un-articulated and under appreciated in typical IS research. For example, in Walsham (2006) we find a distinction between ‘outside’ and ‘involved’ researcher, but we are left without reflections on the embodied presence and engagement of action research – where, we might ask, is the engaged *body*? Furthermore Walsham retains the importance of interviews as a means of interpretation: “Interviews are a part of most interpretive studies as a key way of accessing the interpretations of informants in the field” (Walsham, 2006, 323). In this paper, I will highlight some qualities of the mundane and *experiential* body and suggest that the engaged body can become a vital connection between the disciplines of IS and a broader design-oriented methodological turn to experiential computing.

But let us first, so to speak, find our feet. These are meditations, after all, albeit not the kinds that reach for heavenly insights, but the kind that seek to try out different affective and embodied modalities - not unlike (but then very *much unlike*) medieval scholastic Christian meditations and their search for affective and compassionate representations of the torment of Christ, instructing people ‘*how to feel*’ and how to empathise with (the) suffering (see McNamer, 2010). I choose to call the forthcoming segments meditations partly because they attempt to loosen the mind, to weave webs of significance rather than present consistent arguments. The meditations are also *introspective* of my own work over the past years. Thus, even if I appear to meditate *for* experiential computing and believe that the following might expand the kinds of scholarly inquiry associated with IS, I also meditate *on* myself (or at least on instances that have involved me), and how, if put into a reflective framework, the work that I have carried out in the past years may inform future iterations of IS research.

The first grounding of this paper is the suggestion that the openings I suggest are primarily pertinent to those research tribes and territories that consider ‘design’ to be a core issue of IS. Technologies and environments become reality ‘by design’. Design attitudes, mind-sets, intuitions or culturally significant design ‘placements’ (Buchanan, 1992) are based on generative metaphors and the particular languages with which we frame the problems or challenges in a design intervention. They inspire certain activities, design decisions or *design moves* (Buur, Binder and Brandt, 2002) – those shifts, messy re-orderings and changes of perspective that continuously happen throughout a design project. My meditations here propose that we might generate knowledge, experience and intuitions that feed into design processes differently by focusing on embodiment and sensory participation.

The second grounding is Yoo's call for widening the IS field to deliver more profound understandings of the condition of humans interacting with ubiquitous and pervasive IT (Yoo, 2010). Yoo aims to steer away from IS research perspectives that prioritize humans-as-organizational members and IT as fundamentally instrumental, to focus instead on humans as sensing, moving bodies engaged actively and meaningfully in everyday life. He thus sees IT as fundamentally experiential. How, so Yoo asks, are digital tools and infrastructures interweaved with the experiences of our practical lives? How are experiences mediated and how are humans and the human condition transformed in worlds where computing technologies are ubiquitous? For Yoo, such an inquiry begins and ends with the human experience and with an embodied making-sense-of the world. In evoking 'experiential computing' as a principle or as a starting point for human-centric design, we will need to shift design-oriented inquiry and the kinds of research conducted in IS towards more sensuous research tactics in an effort to inspire or illuminate how futures may be (con)figured technologically. In my view, these research tactics typically resist the classical rules of scientific inquiry, but may potentially be more powerful exploratory vehicles for opening up and animating the sensory, affective, emotional, embodied for further scrutiny within Information Systems Research. The mind sets and concepts of what IS *is* should be stirred, challenged and inspired by what Wright and McCarthy describe as the 'felt' aspects of being-with technology (Wright and McCarthy, 2010).

Yoo suggests that "experiential computing calls for a reorientation of our focus from task performance and information processing to lived experiences of everyday life activities that are digitally mediated. User needs are, therefore, much broader than informational needs for task performance in organizations, reflecting deeper basic human needs and values" (Yoo, 2010, 217). To paraphrase Hayles, arguably information (systems research) has '*lost its body*' (Hayles, 1999) and experiential computing can be seen as part of a conceptual remedy to those largely disembodied subjects in IS, explicitly evoking the mundane body as it is entangled with(in) digital technologies. In this paper I argue that a focus on experiential computing needs ways to conceptualize and engage with 'the body' in an otherwise purified technology and organization-oriented discipline to inform the figuring of possible technological futures.

The reorientation also aims engage differently with those who will come to use (or live with) digital products in the future in ways that transcend customary qualitative or 'interpretive' research strategies and instead points towards vitality, the visceral, embodiment, and the sensuousness of experience. Particularly the notion of non-representational research advocated in the fields of cultural and human geography and sociology (e.g. Lorimer, 2005, Thrift, 2008) has been advocating a re-orientation towards the senses, the moving body, the fleeting and ephemeral – aspects of life poorly dealt with using the research interview, surveys, or focus-groups. Lorimer, for one, argues that non-representational theory "offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation." (Lorimer, 2005, 84). Similarly, proponents of mobilities research argue that 'things' (or people, cultures or discourses) are increasingly becoming mobile. Indeed, mobilities (and the complementary 'moorings' or even 'sedentaries') might be the defining character of the social and some of its proponents call for an increased focus on the mobilization of methods (e.g. Büscher, Urry, & Witchger, 2011). From a mobilities perspective, it seems paradoxical that the research interview that typically sits people down, cuts them off at torso height, sedentary as they are at the table, is still by far the most dominant form of qualitative inquiry in social science (Heath, Brooks, Cleaver & Ireland, 2009). The meditations in this paper signify the same kind of attention to the mobile body and to actualizing experiences through moving and sensing. Hence, in the following, I meditate for walking, sensing, and ultimately for *participation* as three concepts necessary for a more inclusive and innovative orientation towards experiential computing.

## 1.2 A few concepts

Philosophical luminaries such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) Tim Ingold (2007, 2010) and Don Ihde (1990), each with their own flavour, have suggested new ways for how we might think about

bodies and the existential ground of ‘being’ as irreducible to disembodied, mechanistic or rationalistic understandings of ‘the mind’. What roughly tie these authors together is their take on the phenomenology of embodiment and how bodies matter in making sense of – and acting in – the world. In what follows, I draw implicitly on such sensibilities to the lived body with the aim of developing a partial vocabulary to speak about (and for) the body – in case, the walking and sensing body – to the perennial problem of informing and inspiring figurations of appropriate and sustainable futures of computing technologies. Particularly those kinds of IT that are often said to be(come) ubiquitous or pervasive. IT that is mobile and personal as well as place-centric and infrastructural (Messeter, 2009).

The first meditation, on walking, indicates the how we ‘think’ with the feet, or rather; how to understand the *ambulating* human as a conduit through which we can begin to grasp a particular understanding of mobile ITs in the experiential textures of ubiquitous IT. As mentioned, the meditation banks on the ‘mobile methods’ literature (e.g. Büscher, et al. 2011) to suggest that walking around and participation enacted through walking can be *generative* of new researchable entities. Mobile methods as ‘inventive’ opens to new engagements and discoveries, led along by mobile human bodies.

The second meditation, on sensing, is based on the assumption that the sensory is typically sequestered from fieldwork. Rather than critiquing what other researchers have (or have not) done, I take outset in an example from my own fieldwork that highlights how researchers are trained to focus on very limited representations of ‘users’.

The third meditation, on participation, is an attempt to organize walking mobilities and affective, sensory/visceral encounters as tactics that can be enrolled in IS and design. In other words, it aims to explore how we might turn intuitions or openings found by walking tactics and the appreciation of the realm of the senses into design thinking. This part outlines some challenges and opportunities for the design of experiential computing. As such, all three meditations are attempts at emphasizing local and subjective experiential worlds, and to challenge common ideals of positivistic as well as interpretive/idealistic positions advocated in mainstream IS research agendas.

## 2 Meditation. Walking

*‘On ne peut penser et écrire qu’assis’ ([transl.: One cannot think and write except while sitting down] G. Flaubert). – I’ve caught you, nihilist! Sitting still is the very sin against the Holy Spirit. Only peripatetic thoughts have any value. (Nietzsche, 2005/1888: 160)*

Indeed, anthropology, ethnography and philosophy have long histories of thinking and writing about walking. From peripatetic philosophers in ancient Greece to Friedrich Nietzsche, but also Søren Kierkegaard’s pondering perambulations in 19<sup>th</sup> century Copenhagen, Marcel Mauss’ work on body techniques and Lee & Ingold’s more recent anthropological rendering of ‘Ways of Walking’ (Lee & Ingold, 2006) as well as deCerteau’s interpretation of urban pedestrianism as tactical (power) interventions (deCerteau, 1984), a number of scholars have been dedicated to the theories and practice(s) of walking. This is also evident in the ways walking has been taken up as a reflective research tactics in human-geography research (Kusenbach, 2003, Jones, Bunce, Evans, Gibbs, Ricketts, 2008, Anderson, 2004,) within mobilities research (Ricketts, Evans & Jones 2008, Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006) as well as within Human-Computer Interaction and interaction design research (Bidwell, 2012).

The author of this paper is a self-professed ‘walker’, inclined to, and most often enjoying, walking. We find the author in a town in South Eastern US. The occasion is not spurred by formal field-work or any structured data collection. Rather, the meditation arose from reflections on a spontaneous walk and the rather mundane and insignificant activity of finding the way back to my conference hotel on foot:

*“I choose to walk from the social event at the conference back to my hotel. The conference is closing, and it is in the middle of the day. Having just had an enthusiastic conversation with a fellow walker*

and conference attendee about the merits (or lack thereof) of 'walking groups' with bi-weekly meet-ups, a concept I feel then to be overly systematic and lacking the spontaneity and freedom that I associate with walking, my head is filled with concepts and ideas about walking, about social norms and, in particular, with a distinct feeling, nurtured over the past few days, that here in this part of the US, walking without a very clear purpose or in somehow designated places (parks, exercise trails, walkways etc.), is considered somewhat weird to the point of being a suspicious activity.

So, it feels fittingly profound and demonstrative to sling my bag over my shoulder and head out into the afternoon blaze of cars, the sun (much brighter, more unrelenting than home), and the occasional 'power-walker' or jogger. As I normally do, I quickly fall into having an internal dialogue with myself as I step along the various surfaces of sidewalks, grassy patches, and the occasional stretch of gritted shells. I try to think of nothing, or 'just enjoying' (as a participant researcher in one of my walks once noted), but I have a hard time not thinking about what I am doing. I think of the cars, or the people in them and the fact that, wearing my casual conference bests (clean white shirt, black pants - and a rather heavy shoulder bag with a navy blue sports jacket slung across) I probably look somewhat out of place amongst other walkers. Do I look lost?



Figure 1. "Also, the sun! Even on an overcast day. I have no hat and on the bridge I feel very exposed to the glaring rays"

As I remember it from the taxi ride yesterday I need to cross a sun-bleached concrete bridge across the water on the left. To assure myself I ask two women exercisers who a walking towards their car. They agree: to get to the hotel I need to cross the bridge around the corner there and then continue on. They stand still for a few seconds, seemingly anticipating a follow up question. I pretend to calculate the route in my head, looking to find a cue for where the bridge, still hidden behind a few buildings, starts. Then they smile at me, we part and I walk a block and slowly begin ascending the bridge. I begin to become less occupied with myself, and fall into what I feel to be an efficient stride, arms swinging rhythmically at my side. Which also makes me increasingly sweaty and uncomfortable. I will have to change my shirt back at the hotel. My ears are filled with the sounds of passing cars, my



own footfalls, my pulse thumping in my inner ear, wind noise. Also, the sun! I have no hat and on the bridge I feel very exposed to the glaring rays. I recall the times in the past when a tropical sun had burned my scalp and my ears, and consider wearing my sports jacket over my head. I decide against it. Please, just let me get a bit of a tan. Not a burn! I walk quickly now, spotting some trees at the end of the bridge. The sidewalk consists of large slabs of concrete, and the transitions between the slabs are uneven and difficult to walk on. A woman rides her bike towards me. She looks a bit dishevelled and seems to talk to herself. I can hear she is muttering loudly as comes closer and she brightens up as we are passing – she half shouts something garbled that could be a greeting, - or it might not be. I begin taking pictures with my iPhone. Mostly of little things, - frequently just ‘exotic’ road signs and oddities along the way – but where are the people? I seem to be alone here, on the bridge. Here come a few exercisers, a couple walking briskly. They smile and nod at me as we pass. It is as if they acknowledge the ‘hardship’ they and I are enduring: *We are the same, you and we.*



Figure 2. “Here come a few exercisers, a couple walking briskly. They smile and nod at me as we pass”

*Like bus drivers in the city I come from who often wave to greet fellow bus drivers on the road. Or like motorcyclists on the German autobahn. I begin to feel tuned in to the place. I see a silhouette of two people at the end of the bridge, dark shades against the sun...*”

A walk such as the one portrayed here is arguably very mundane. The reader may, rightly, wonder what purpose the representation of my short walk across the bridge ‘means’ in the context of ‘experiential computing’. I suggest that walking can be seen as a way of *making place*. As such, walking is not portrayed as a way of simply moving the body around, but it is, to lend a phrase from Merleau-Ponty, a way of being in the world (1945/2002) and an ‘engaged body’ practice that links the walker in a particular way to the immediate surroundings. Pink proposes that walking contributes to “sensory embodied experience as a basis from which to empathise with others” (Pink 2007, 243), and



it is in this light that we might find value in walking. Walking as a research technique (if perhaps not a method, see e.g. Kusenbach, 2003, Anderson, 2004) sensitizes us to the body engaged in motion. Walking is a particular kind or mode of consciousness. As I walk, I am engaged in a cultural and socially significant activity. I ‘socialize’ fleetingly, ephemerally with passers-by; I, somewhat stubbornly and in opposition, identify myself as a walking person; I perform various appropriate social signaling about my presence and the presence of others (Goffmann, 1967) – all those things that can be referred to by using Bourdieus notion of *hexis* – the cultural dispositions and *habitus* of (or performed *through*) the body (Bourdieu 1980/1990). But beyond that; as I walk, my body is more than ‘symbolic’ or reducible to capital or some ‘textual’ significance that can be abstracted and interpreted. My body is the living, sensing body. The odd angles of the concrete and those hard textures that I feel my feet connecting to beneath me, the warm breeze as I walk the length of the bridge, the sun, the sounds of cars passing, humming tires on concrete, the pulse in my ear, my pace, the rhythm of my gait, the people who walk or bike pass me, the heat, the smells of the sea and the weight of my shoulder bag. My sweat-drenched shirt, the occasional, fleeting eye contact with fellow pedestrians; these all contribute to my experience of ‘being there’, of being in a particular place.

It is important to recognize here, that my account of – and meditation on – walking over the bridge is not set against the bridge or the specific location as a topographical ‘problem’, e.g. a problem of movement vs. non-movement, problems of legibility, navigation or way-finding. Rather than walking (together) as a means for studying- or engaging in problem-solving, Wunderlich has advocated walking instead as a form of intervention: “Walking is not simply a means to traverse urban space but also a way of becoming acquainted and a form of intervention in urban space. Depending on how it is performed, walking may inspire and influence creative responses to places. In this sense, walking is a way of discovering, creating and or transforming the city. It can be an aesthetic and creative practice as much as a critical and spatial one” (Wunderlich 2008, 136). In Wunderlich’ rendering places are essentially *articulated through walking* – they appear and become legible through my own and others movements, and places are opened up for creative and participatory processes: planning, design, ‘infra-structuring’ and so on.

In pursuing the experiential computing agenda, walking (and ‘walking-with’) is a technique that helps us understand how people perform and experience their mobile lives. Not merely how they use mobile technologies whilst walking (although such *truly mobile technologies* are indeed interesting, Marshall & Tenent, 2013), but more pressingly; how are places performed and experienced and how are the senses continuously, fluidly shaping experiences? How might new digital and ubiquitous technologies, that are appropriate and mindful rather than intrusive and mindless, be integrated into our future mobile lives? How might they operate alongside the multifaceted sensory and felt experiences of being without merely pushing a simple agenda of ‘more connectivity’ or push more media technologies into the fierce competition for our perceptual landscapes and our dwindling ‘attentional’ resources (McCullough, 2013); our memory-scapes (heritage technologies?), leisure-scapes (tourism technologies, idling, gaming, dwelling?), practice-scapes (connecting, working, commuting, communicating, wayfinding)? While the research interview has many benefits and works well for certain kinds of knowledge, walking (together) – as a kind of *deep topography* (The London Perambulator, no date, website) enables us to ponder how our own (and other) bodies are engaged experiential fields or ‘scapes’, how the senses unfold and operate in the engagement with the particular field or environment. This perspective opens up new avenues for research, particularly for the design of appropriately mobile, place-centric and ubiquitous technologies that are so often invoked as the experiential fundamental fabric of (near-future) urbanism (Messeter, 2009, McCullough, 2004, 2013).

### 3 Meditation. Sensing

We move closer, now, to the body. How are we to engage in the senses when we do field work? As Pink (2009) points out, the sensory has been approached in a variety of ways in anthropology. Studies have often included the question of *the place of senses* in particular cultures, e.g. on how the senses

are enacted and, typically, how the visual sense is located and performed culturally in relation to other senses. More recently, the sensory and sensing as such have been studied in ethnographic work as a means to reflect on both participatory/reflective ethnographic projects as well as to engender new ways of communicating (about) fieldwork. The following meditation is a brief sequence from my own fieldwork on tourism (see Bødker and Browning 2013a, 2013b) and suggests that the felt qualities of being ‘matters’ in research. At the same time, the example shows how disciplinary framing might discourage an engagement in the sensory worlds of participants.

*I sit now in my office, immersed in hours of video material captured on a field study. I have no definite plan, but just browse through video from different walk with tourists. I come across a sequence that I have marked out as somewhat interesting, but now, when I revisit that situation, I begin to realize why. It was a disaster: "August, 2010. Magnetic Island. North Queensland. Australia. I take the small ferry over to Magnetic Island, a beautiful small tropical island, having arranged to meet with the two young tourists Christa and her fellow German traveller at the Bungalow Bay hostel.*

*From there we have a rented car for 5 hours. As we meet, we have a coffee, and a short chat about the proceedings of the day. It all comes down to me having asked them to simply take me on a tour of the island. Whatever they wanted to see, just show me around. We are interested in how tourists ‘make place’, and the only thing they need to do is to show me where they want to walk and ‘talk-aloud’. For this, they need to wear a hat equipped with a small video camera on the brim. After a drive around, we end up at West Point where the two girls get out of the car to walk around for a while. I am beginning to be very aware that the girls have not really said anything for a while. Perhaps they have been too engrossed in the process of navigating the small 4X4 through the rather neglected trail to West Point. We walk along on the beach. The weather is beautiful, - sunny with a mild breeze. Christa is walking with her feet in the low water close to the waters edge, while I am walking further in, on the beach. Neither is saying very much, mostly just comments about the weather.*



Figure 3. “We walk along on the beach. The weather is beautiful, - sunny with a mild breeze”

*She begins picking up small seashells and pretty stones from the water, studying them and sticking a few in her pocket. Still walking along, I am getting seriously frustrated and the following 'conversation' was captured with the small hat-mounted camera:*

*Me: \*inaudible\**

*Christa: what?*

*Me: (louder) ah, ...talk a little about, about what you are thinking about?*

*Christa: Ok (\*windnoise\*)*

*Christa: Yes, we...I actually don't think that much right now (laughs). Just enjoying*

*Me: So, when you are thinking something...*

*Christa: yes...(walks, looking down at her feet in the water)*

*[9 seconds lapse](\*windnoise\*)*

*Christa: [she looks up, at me and the houses behind me] Again, I think it is strange why there isn't any people on the beach here, when they have these summerhouses..."*



*Figure 4. "Christa is walking with her feet in the low water close to the waters edge, while I am walking further in, on the beach".*





Figure 5. *“She begins picking up small seashells and pretty stones from the water, studying them and sticking a few in her pocket.”*



Figure 6. *[9 seconds lapse]: [she looks up, at me and the houses behind me] “Again, I think it is strange why there isn’t any people on the beach here, when they have these summerhouses...”*

*In my voice, as I hear myself ask Christa to ‘talk-aloud’, I re-experience the frustration of walking with her, captivated as she is by her own feet in the water. As I review the video, I re-experience the feeling of inadequacy, of being an unqualified, inexperienced, amateurish researcher who has no rapport with my participant. On the other hand I also hear my academically trained concern for producing data – for probing ‘what she thinks about’. And I immediately see the result of my researchers mindset in the video: Christa is pulled from of her tropical reverie, yanked out of the experience of her feet in the water as I ask her to make sense to me. Because she is NOT making sense to me. Or rather, she is obviously sensing, but I fail to appreciate this and ask her for some ‘intellectual’ meaning – what does she think about the place, how can she verbalize and ultimately vocalize her concerns and thoughts so that I can represent these in a paper that I am already beginning to compose in my head. And it takes her a full 9 seconds to come up with some ‘meaning’. In a rather insincere moment, she reaches back to a conversation we had a few minutes ago, about the summerhouses, simply, so it seems, to satisfy me.*

Rarely do we talk about such ‘awkward moments’ in ethnography (Koning and Ooi, 2013), but in this case, I would argue that it reveals rather more than my inadequacy or the awkwardness of the ethnographic encounter. Our conversation reveals a conflict between my particular scholarly training and moment that Christa is so intimately and sensuously engaged in. As a researcher, I impose my need to relate something that my participant said or somehow reasoned about. But by doing so I also depreciate the experience of her feet in the water, relegating the felt, bodily experience as inferior and less significant to my project of trying to understand how she experiences the beach. And obviously, the experience of feet in the water is of the utmost importance to Christa at that precise point. Perhaps, my failure to appreciate Christa’s experience is aggravated by the fact that Christa and I are *not* walking side by side. I am not participating in Christa’s path; I am sharing neither the rhythm nor, literally, the *pace* of her activity. I have placed myself on firmer ground, further ashore, wearing practical shoes, and I choose to take the role of a slightly distanced observer who can (presumably) do the occasional ‘probing’ to sift some sense out of my research participant.

Here, I only relate my own inadequacy, but I suggest that depreciating such *word-less* and felt qualities of *being-there* (or indeed ‘making-there’, see Bidwell and Browning, 2006) in our research participants might not be so rare. As researchers we are trained to look for that which can somehow be represented to an audience, and to those things that conform to our particular ‘genre’ – essentially those things that are publishable. Since things such as affect, the sensory, the visceral and the experiential are difficult and slippery notions to consider, and since the established emphasis in disciplines such as IS research has been put on optimization, prediction, usability, and organizational impacts of technology, the ‘felt’ aspect, the sensory engagement with the world that new forms of ubiquitous and pervasive/mobile IT allows has been, and will continue to be, neglected. Unless.

#### **4 (Meta)meditation. Participation**

Enough. This last meditation, the *point*, attempts to merge the two previous meditations into the outline of a tenable vector in IS research, aligned with Yoo’s notion of experiential computing, and implying non-representational research tactics guided by the sensory. To do this, I will contemplate the idea of *participation* as a vital element for experiential computing research. This is not necessarily advocating an explicit Participatory IT Design (PD) strategy or model, although I sympathise strongly with the ideals, but rather to suggest that walking (together) can be used as a grounded approach to understand how people experience their environment; how the body is used in the environment, how social and cultural interaction is afforded by or structured in an environment, and how the senses are engaged as a conduit for place making. It is in this context that Lee and Ingold suggest the simple observation that ‘sharing or creating a walking rhythm with other people can lead to a very particular closeness and bond between the people involved (Lee & Ingold, 2006, 69). So, in the first meditation, I pondered how walking *feels* and the multitude of sensory engagement involved in a very simple walk. Bidwell has observed that “[in] isiXhosa, the home language in Eastern Cape, South Africa,

“Sihamba sobabini” means, literally, “We are walking together,” but figuratively, “Are we still on the same page?” (Bidwell 2012, 68). Similarly, in a Danish dialect, to achieve “fælles fodslaw” (i.e. a *common stride*) means to reach consensus on a subject or find a common direction forward in a deliberative process. Yet ‘walking together’ is not merely a metaphor. Instead, participating in walking can be a direct link to collaborative ways of place making and connects us to how people move about, what and how they sense, what senses are emphasized and when, how their lives are structured around places, how technologies (of various kinds) are enrolled and embedded in the practices of making place and so on (Edensor, 2010). I suggest that the efforts of participatory and cooperative design, in an experiential computing agenda, may include thinking about fieldwork as a conduit for a *sensory apprenticeship* (Pink, 2009), performed in activities such as ‘walking with’ or ‘go-alongs’ (Kusenbach 2003, Anderson, 2004). This should be done in an effort to fundamentally shift the focus of user-centered research in IS or design work from a rather narrow ‘cognitive’ sense-making framework towards a more fully embodied and affect-oriented understanding that focuses on felt qualities of being and being-with technologies. To this, Yi’En (2013) has suggested that the rhythmic aspects of walking are akin to dialogues or conversations: “Walking and photographing is rhythmical and brings our bodies into “conversation” with the environments we move through. Hence, as much as walking is a directed act, the process is opened to opportunities for both attractive forces and distractions. In this way, we allow ourselves to be seduced by the forces of our socio-material worlds.” (Yi’En, 2013, 3). In this sense, walking is a form participation in the environment and a form of learning about the environment *of others* that we are hardly likely to attain sitting at a table for an interview, literally cutting our research participants off from their torso down.

Secondly, my second meditation shows an example of a ‘scholarly skewed’ failure to acknowledge, to connect with, and finally to *re-present* the sensory moment in an excerpt from my own fieldwork. The remedy, perhaps, is to develop further the notion of sensory apprenticeship – that we may cultivate fieldworking practices in IS research that takes outset in the sensory, the felt qualities of places and events. This move also connects to the overall gesture in non-representational research that prioritizes the fleeting, unexceptional and mundane-yet-affective over the fixed-in-place, the crisis, and interpretation. Yi’En has argued for the need to reclaim “fieldworking as experimental, contingent, eventful, and becoming” (Yi’En, 2013, 2). Indeed we might find that fieldwork that emphasizes sensory participation and learning is a messy, confusing, frustrating and difficult event to communicate to an audience. As Pink states; “often moments of sensory learning are not necessarily planned processes through which a particular research question is pursued in a structured way as it might be in the context of a survey or even a semi-structured interview” (Pink 2009, 65). Learning about how other people sense and feel their environment is not planned, but emerges in the interaction and sensibilities performed throughout fieldwork. In thinking about the senses, I have reflected on the status or the disciplinary ‘gestalt’ of the sensory – i.e. what is fore- and back-grounded by our disciplinary approaches and methods. In Yoo’s call for research on IS ‘experiential’ he emphasizes how ‘experience’ shapes and informs engagement in an increasingly technologically saturated world. While the sensory is not necessarily emphasized to any great extent in Yoo, I find that seeing the sensory as a key component of embodied interaction with (technological) environments must be a central concern, usefully framed in the concept of sensory apprenticeship and participation.

A key challenge here is *re-presentation*. Following Yi’En’s notion of fieldwork as experimental and contingent, I will argue that a sensory, experiential focus in IS will have to allow for new modes with which to communicate about fieldwork to an audience. While text is currently the preferred medium in most academic tribes, new ways will have to be cultivated with which we can talk about and participate in fieldwork (e.g. Pink, 2007, Lorimer, 2005, Thrift, 2007). Visual, acoustic, poetic, even perhaps mobile (e.g. soundwalks?) or olfactory (smell-scapes?) may be ways in with which we can engage ourselves and others in a thoughtful and empathetic understandings of the lives and places of the people we ultimately seek to intervene in by informing design approaches and ways in which we see, narrativize and *take seriously* people; their aspirations, emotions, felt lives and realities.



## 5 Recapitulation

It somehow begins and ends with the body. And of course the body does not exclude those things that are normally taken to transpire, it seems, in our brains – since the brain, obviously, is as much part of the body as, say, the feet. As Bergson has it: ‘There is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience’ (Bergson, 1908/1988:33). As I emerge from my meditation, I might find that I have somehow over-emphasized the body and the here-and-now of situated experiences at the possible expense of the extensive cultural, mental, and sensory ‘memorywork’ or what Casey calls ‘the ever-lengthening shadow of our bodily past’ (Casey, 1987, 194) – the shadow that ties bodies, history, narrative, experience, and the senses together. No matter. In this paper, I have simply attempted to suggest that some of the antecedents of tomorrow’s IT can be found in the experiencing body. IS research should, I believe, begin a partial reorientation towards the experiential aspects of computing – essentially asking questions about whom or what we are and how we are sensuously, affectively, and bodily engaged in worlds that are increasingly mediated by digital technologies. Yoo (2010) has been invaluable in putting the experiential to the fore in IS. But in proposing experiential computing we need to ask whether the methods and the philosophical foundations we typically have at our disposal are sufficient for the task, and what new groundings might be useful for informing further work.

Meditations are essentially introspective, centered on the self, but hopefully the loose, associative, struggling expositions above can lead us on the way to conceptualize, study and ultimately build appropriate experiential computing technologies for the future.

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