

Graduating From Kindergarten (September 2003)

The following is the first in a series of short 'thought' papers thinking about our future interaction with devices of communication and media delivery. The comments are based on research, observations of current behaviours, social and behavioural theory, technological possibilities and future projections. They represent a personal, informed guess, designed to stimulate thought and to question current strategies and implementations.

We are today like very young children in a kindergarten, picking up individual bricks, examining them, playing with them, dropping them only to pick up another. Ours is a world in which we focus on the individual under consideration, be that a person or an inanimate object. The future as we leave our kindergarten will see us attempting to understand how things relate to one another, to build new interconnected structures and networks. In this way our relationship with devices of communication and media delivery will become both more complex, as devices become interlinked into the very fabric of our lives, and yet more simple as they become easier to use, less overtly present and disruptive. Today's distinction between 'virtual' or 'cyber' worlds/reality and the physical world will exist no longer. Just as knowledge and language, 'things' that we can not necessarily touch, see or smell, are inherent in our living and inhabiting the material world of tangible things, so future generations will regard the internet and other forms of media networks, information and communication. Within the physical world they will be reinstated as just differing facets of one reality.

Our lives will become increasingly mobile or perhaps a better word would be fluid, this will be characterised by great physical mobility (within the local and extended environment), but in turn this will be more than matched by our ability to sustain and develop networks through communication and access to information. Mobility will be matched and reinforced through our increasing use of wireless connection, The time or space between events, times when we are physically or mentally 'in transit' will become increasing important. We have already witnessed the early population of this space via SMS. In conjunction with mobility will be a corresponding increase in the 'fracturing' and localising of linear time. Most events will be to some extent locally 'composed' by individuals or groups/networks of related individuals, for example a group sharing (either in physical or communication proximity) a broadcast experience at a time to suit themselves. The corollary to this will be a return to even greater significance of a few time dependent, extended local, national or global events, creating moments of shared broader social cohesion.

Authoring and managing will become increasingly dominant themes. Already we have the tools to 'control' the way we are perceived and interact with others, SMS and MMS being good examples, enhancements to existing and new technologies will increase these powers. We will all to some extent be 'authors' of the self, creating and controlling our own image rights, and appearances in divergent networks or groups. This will become increasingly important as peer-to-peer content and experience creation takes over from mass broadcast media. Indeed in many cases mass broadcast media will be providing basic content to be edited, re-authored and shared by

localised (localised means more than physically local, the experience could be 'local' to a physically dispersed group) networks or groups. The interaction of authoring requires a highly involved relationship to communications and information, a level of involvement we will not wish to sustain at all times. During more passive times 'ambient' presence will become important. Indeed many of today's media delivery devices will become increasingly ambient, physically blending into the environment whilst providing background content but with the potential for this to be actively modified and foregrounded as individuals or groups require.

There will be increased emphasis on actively managing relationships, information and media. This management will extend from authoring outbound content and communication to managing incoming traffic. We already face too many choices and options. However whilst choice options will continue to proliferate this will be accompanied by a growth in ordering and managing agents capable of exercising choice and sustaining the 'infra-structure' (both physical and informational) of our personal networks on our behalf. Our personal interventions will increasingly ask less of us at a low grade operational level, we will in fact act as genuine managers rather than as we do today as mechanics. Currently many of our devices are relatively 'dumb' or at least are locked into structures design when devices were dumb. As device intelligence increases and older design structures break down devices will increasingly manage themselves to optimise performance within a 'constellation' of other devices. In so doing they will allow us to move from context to context (location to location) whilst retain a high degree of connectedness, we will be able to occupy several 'spaces' simultaneously yet retain a high degree of control.

The foregoing comments must seem very optimistic. Today we have mobile devices with more functions than most can use, interactive television has so far failed to really excite (beyond voting), few of us can operate our video recorder let alone our PC and devices barely communicate with one another. This is the case because our technologies have been developed independently (and are still often seen this way) with each increasingly borrowing elements of functionality from the others and so becoming ever more complex, leaving the user to actively manage low level mechanical choices. In other words what we have today is non-life integrated technology. As we move from our kindergarten we will set aside our individual bricks and realise that their true value lies in the complex structures we can build with them. We will discover that there is no single killer application, that there is no 'virtual world', these were all useful shorthand's, fictions that assisted our early understanding. The world beyond the kindergarten is a complex series of relationships, where things exist in relation to one another. However we must never underestimate the achievement of developing and learning to live with these bricks, how they might fit together is another issue.