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Cooltown's Cool, But Not Complete

If Cooltown were and edible entity, the flavor one would perceive of it would be quite interesting. At first the taste would be sweet, appealing to the visceral senses, but after some quiet reflection, one find would come to realize that there are many missing ingredients in the recipe. Each scenario in Hewlett Packard's advertisement video brings forth another example of a networked world, where computers simply and transparently make life better. However, it is easy to create a scenario in which a designer's tools work. It is in the "real world" where these creations break down. Cooltown is most definitely cool when used in the contexts shown by the scenarios, but the technological advances found here are not without flaws. This essay will summarize the goals of the Cooltown project and discuss the good, bad, and ugly parts of this idealized system.

Cooltown's Goals

The goal of the Cooltown project is to create an array of digital devices enabled with internet access, thereby allowing information appliances to communicate with one another. Each of these tools will then be able to present contextually relevant information to its user. Project researchers state, "The key addition of the Cooltown approach here is the embodiment of URLs in local device-to-device transfer" [Barton, p.4]. An example inspired by this method is a presenter at a conference uploading her presentation directly to the projector by simply directing it to a URL that is beamed from her PDA. This type of connectedness is very powerful, and allows the integration of the physical world with the virtual, computer based one. Researchers are also studying the usability of the tools they hope to present, which is most definitely important, but I believe that much more focus must be placed on the contexts in which these tools will be used. It would be utterly useless to have utilities which are extremely "usable," but are never actually used in the contexts for which they were originally designed!

The Good

There are a number of *great* technological advancements presented in the Cooltown Video. The On-"Screen" displays could have significant impacts in the future. Examples of such displays were presented on an auto's windshield, on a row of windows when giving a presentation, and on a fireman's protective head unit. These types of display technologies allow for information to be added to the user's environment, causing easy parsing of especially

relevant cues. These external cognition implements make information processing a much easier chore, especially in stressful situations and information rich settings.

A number of communication agents were also presented in the film. These tools act as intermediaries when communicating between a number of organizational systems. “CarTrack” is a prime example of such an agent. This tool notified the user of a problem with his car, and then directed him to the nearest service station. The service station was warned of the incoming problem, and a taxi was ordered for the user. Other communication agents presented were Mrs. Walters’ watch (which alerted paramedics), and the locator unit placed on a cat that was saved by firemen. These tools could serve to simplify the lives of users, but must be designed intelligently so that they do not interfere when they are not needed.

The Bad

Though these tools are shown to be helpful in many situations, in actual use they may serve to disturb the lives of users. Many of the technologies shown in this video are rather large and seem somewhat clunky. For example, while Mrs. Walters’ watch did serve to save her life, it is a visual eyesore that may be avoided because of its embarrassing appearance. Further, the locator unit on the neck of the cat also seemed large, and may serve to impede the cat’s normal walking gate. These tools must be designed such that they fit users’ normal lifestyles. Mrs. Walters should not be expected to wear an ugly device on her body, and the cat should not be impeded by a large hanging gadget. If these tools are to become truly pervasive, they must not call attention to themselves. Rather, they should fade into the background of users’ everyday lives.

Many of the technologies presented in Cooltown are extremely intrusive, and interrupt the flow of their users’ habits. The man in the car is often looking at the windshield rather than the road, which could serve to be a dangerous proposition. Also, Bob is talked to by many machines in situations where he probably does not care to hear from them. For example, when walking through a door, one would most likely hope to be authenticated and then simply enter the workplace, rather than listening to a computer say “congratulations.”

Later, Bob is interrupted by his wife on his desktop computer. This is a very obtrusive action. There is something to be said for having many tools in order to accomplish different tasks. Having separate apparatus allows for attentional splits between areas of a workspace. Receiving phone calls or video-phone messages may be better handled by a completely separate machine, since displaying all sources of communication and work on a single desktop may overload the user. Allowing machines to interrupt users is a questionable offense. This topic should be handled carefully, and these digitally enabled tools should intelligently choose

when to display information to users, so that safety and attentional abilities are not compromised.

The Ugly

There are many issues still to be solved by the researchers of Cooltown. The scenarios presented in the video present some of the best use scenarios of the technologies, but many of today's technological issues still go unsolved by the Cooltown presentation. For example, users will obviously need some understanding of the computer systems in order to do maintenance on their numerous systems, and in case problems arise.

Cooltown also does not serve to ameliorate the Digital Divide that exists in our world today. These technologies are shown to serve middle and upper class first world users, but how will tomorrow's pervasive technologies serve the lower classes and those in third world nations? This is a question that is surely worth asking by Cooltown researchers.

Finally, I must remark that it is difficult to envision a world in which these tools are not attached to proprietary trademarks and icons which signify specific companies. Cooltown is not likely to keep its one-word label. In the case that this city was brought into actual existence, I am sure that one would never hear the word Cooltown without an "HP" attached to it. Companies will devise novel forms of advertisement, and make sure that users take note of which company is serving them at any given moment. My hope is that this is not necessarily the case, however major changes will have to take place in order for corporations to stop labeling their products as they do today.

The ideas behind Cooltown are most definitely exciting. One would hope that these technologies are sufficiently researched and brought to market, advancing the lives of users transparently. But researchers in this field must be sure that these tools do not have negative effects in the lives of users, or else all of the positives of these technologies will be washed away.