

On waiting and killing time: *doing hanging around*

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Waiting is intimately related to time and perceptions of time, and can be characterised broadly as the time spent between some indeterminate starting point (at time point A) and an expected future event (at time point B). It is an extremely subjective experience and is commonly used to describe the ‘pause’ before any future event, at any level of intensity, from the micro-temporal ‘please wait while your file downloads’, to the existential macro-temporal ‘waiting for death’ as the time between birth and death. Notably, and pointing to the direction that this position paper takes, in each of these exemplar episodes of waiting, the wait is usually filled by some other activity. Thus the reality of waiting is that it can only really be understood, a) in terms of the experience of boredom and inactivity whilst waiting (which is linked to the control that the waiter has over their own activity and to the keenness of the waiter for the future event), b) in terms of the inability or reduced ability to do something whilst waiting (economists might call this the opportunity cost), and c) from the perspective of the expected future event: we may wait for several things simultaneously, but we may not experience each individual wait time as *waiting*, unless we view each from the perspective of its associated event (i.e. by taking a one-dimensional, event-focussed perspective). We do have dictionary definitions that offer some insight into the nature of the wait (from Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999):

Wait v:

1. *vi to stay in one place or do nothing for a period of time until something happens or in the expectation or hope that something will happen*
2. *vi to stop or slow down in order to allow somebody else to catch up*
3. *vi to be hoping for something or on the lookout for something*
4. *vi to be postponed or put off until later*
5. *vi to be ready or available for somebody to take or use*
6. *vt to delay something, especially a meal, because somebody is expected to arrive soon*
7. *vti to work as a waiter*

Wait n:

a period of time spent while expecting something to happen

I particularly like point 7 (‘to work as a waiter’), in that someone might actually have the job of just waiting, not something that I had considered as such before. Yet this definitional approach to the phenomenon is not very helpful to us in understanding the perceived or ‘*lived*’ experience of those waiting, and the way that the wait is actually achieved through *practices* of waiting. We have written about waiting before, in the context of the work of mobile professionals, and this snippet offers some insight into when it occurs and its effects on activity:

While it was possible to talk about the purposes of business trips, the nature of work undertaken during these trips was highly varied. The work carried out cannot be usefully characterised simply in terms of the specific work purposes of the trip, such as the need to meet face to face with a client to discuss something. To do so would be to ignore the large amounts of time outside the scheduled activities of a trip that characterise much of business travel. This time was described by participants as “dead time”, “travel” time, “spare” time or “wasted” time in some way. The common factor was that this time occurred between tasks and between meetings, over which the participants had little control over the environment and the resources that they had to work with. Work in this ‘dead time’ would take place in a variety of locations (e.g. cars, trains, buses, aeroplanes, hotel rooms, airports and office buildings), each placing a range of different demands on the information artefacts that could be used and the kind of work that could therefore be done. (Perry, *et al.*, 2001)

Since much work requires the reading, generation or transformation of some kind of artefact, the poverty of resources when mobile means that many mobile workers are not able to work as

effectively as they would normally be able to. The ability to work in 'dead time' was therefore a crucial aspect of the work of the mobile professionals in our studies that allowed them to keep on top of their workload. Each of the locations that they transit through places a range of different demands on the information artefacts that can be used and the kind of work that can therefore be done. The 'ecological flexibility' of the technologies that they have available to them and use is therefore an important part of their work, making the mobile phone and paper particularly useful in supporting it. Many of the participants would take paper documents with them that they could work on during dead time, and would gather information while on their trip that they could reflect on or refer to during periods of dead time.

The notion of dead time is interesting in that for many participants this involved a certain amount of pre-planning in terms of what they would be doing during that time, and indeed that they expected to have moments whilst waiting for something else to happen. This pre-planning reflects the uncertainties about the environments within which they expect to work in, and the extent to which their mobile technology sets supported their office-based work style. For example, if people's work style was primarily phone based, then having a mobile telephone while they were away would often be sufficient to allow a relatively flexible, unplanned continuation of their ordinary work.

Information technology use plays an important role in contemporary waiting, especially through the mobile telephone, which allows us to act somewhere other than where we are waiting. We have called these technologies (see Perry and Brodie, 2005) Lazarus devices (reviving dead time), although more realistically they should be seen as Zombie devices (only partial reanimation). But such devices are only a means of achieving what we have called 'mobilisation work' (Perry and Brodie, 2005), and differ only in the reach of action over a distance, and in the intensity of computational action that they afford. They offer improvements on the impact of waiting at a qualitative and quantitative level, but are not, of themselves radically transformative. Industry rhetoric would like us to think about technology as a post-modern agent in 'the death of time', but our data does not suggest this; rather it can offer a resource to making more effective use of our time, or to perform our activities in a different way or temporal sequence. But this is hardly radical. People make use of this technology (in the same way that they used paper previously) precisely because they are waiting, and not because the concept of waiting has been weakened or vanquished. We still wait, albeit maybe a little more productively.

Some of the activities we have seen in our data are explicitly expressed as 'killing' time, but this was rare, and when explored in detail was usually more complex than this. Chatting, reading, traditional games and game technologies are ways that is commonly achieved, as they are suited to filling time with some form of enjoyment. Yet even here, this is more than just a means of performing time travel: these activities are often associated with betterment in some form through learning or developing prowess. In this respect, reading and gaming are little different to the 'planful opportunism' seen in the work-based use of dead time, in which this time is used purposefully, rather than just passed through as quickly as possible. Even sleeping or resting offers the potential to time-shift activities to occasions when the person would otherwise be unable to perform them, behaviour that we commonly see on public transport.

There is of course an alternative view into the notion of waiting as killing time, such as that of the disempowered drone worker, so eloquently expressed in the song from '*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthurs Court*':

We're busy doing nothing,
working all day through.
We're trying to find lots of things not to do.
We're busy going nowhere, isn't it such a crime ?
We'd like to be unhappy but we never do have the time.

This perspective on the wait differs from those expressed earlier, in the notion of work-as-waiting. Certainly, the time is being filled, but worthlessly, and is consequently experienced as a drag. A similar view can be seen in the groups of teenagers hanging around fast food restaurants, perpetually waiting for some (often never actuating) event to happen (often termed 'loitering', not just the neutral form of waiting). It may be that the perceived waiting here is more keenly experienced, or that the waiting *is* the event, but the actual constitution of the waiting is often filled with other unanticipated interesting or pleasurable events (the very naff truism 'life is what happens whilst you are waiting for other things to happen').

So where does this leave us on waiting? The data and its examination tells us about what people do when they are waiting, and the ways that they make use of the time that they have. Certainly we can improve the connectivity across people's lives so that their time spent waiting in resource-restricted environments is more closely integrated with their activities in other resource-rich settings. But technology developments can do more than simply allow us to fill this time with things that we could only otherwise do elsewhere. They drag us away from the setting and decontextualise us from what we are physically and proximally engaged in (and there may be dangers attendant to this, for example concentration loss whilst driving or muggings in public places). Perhaps we could improve the quality of the waiting rather than trying to diminish its resource constraining effects on our plans. Examples of how this is already achieved include the use of portable music players that add a soundtrack to the waiting experience (imagine the cast of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* wearing iPod headphones – a very different play, bereft of its existentialist theme and empty silences); this could for example, be enhanced with wireless technology to allow us to co-listen to music with our fellow waiters, and get a feel for their interests, or of the overall vibe of their aggregated waiting experience.

References

Perry, M. and Brodie, J. (2005) Virtually connected, practically mobile. In Andriesson and Vartiainen (Eds.) *Mobile Virtual Work: a new paradigm*, p. 97-127, Berlin: Springer.

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