A Swatch in the Fabric of Time

Internet Time and the Spatio-Temporal Organisation of Everyday Computer Use

By Rowan Wilken

Space seems to be either tamer or more inoffensive than time; we’re forever meeting people who have watches, very seldom people who have compasses. We always need to know what time it is ... but we never ask ourselves where we are. —Georges Perec

In his intimate and idiosyncratic study of various ‘species of spaces’, the eccentric polymath Georges Perec makes the following observation:

Like everyone else, I presume, I feel an attraction for zero points, for the axes and points of reference from which the positions and distances of any object in the universe can be determined: - the Equator - the Greenwich Meridian... (1999: 82)

Curiously, fascination with meridian lines does not appear to have diminished with the movement from terrestrial space to cyberspace. Temporal locatability would seem to be as desirable to the ‘navigators’ of the electronic matrix as it was (and continues to be) to their ocean-going kin. Swiss watchmakers Swatch, following in the footsteps of the enigmatic horologist John Harrison, have moved to meet this need (somewhat more quickly than Harrison, it must be said), creating a new standard of timekeeping called 'Internet Time'. Internet Time or 'beat time' divides the day into 1000 ‘beats’, with each beat equivalent to one minute, 26.4 seconds. ‘That means that 12 noon in the old time system is the equivalent of @500 Swatch beats’ (Swatch, 2000).

For ease of use, the Swatch homepage has an on-line and downloadable time converter. But, of course, each cycle or ‘zeroing’ must be measured against a reference point. So, to complement their new time system, Swatch has created a new meridian: Biel Mean Time (BMT). Each new ‘day’ in cyberspace begins at midnight BMT (@000 Swatch Beats) (Central European Wintertime). This meridian is strategically positioned ‘for all to see on the façade of the Swatch International Headquarters on Jakob-Staempfli Street, Biel, Switzerland’ (Swatch, 2000). The most common mechanisms for interfacing with Internet Time are the on-screen desktop ‘beat time’ calculator, and the current crop of Swatch wristwatches.

The claims that attend the creation of Internet Time are for the facilitation of synchronous communication, and have received high-profile support from MIT’s Nicholas Negroponte:

Cyberspace has no seasons and no night and day. Internet Time is absolute time for everybody. Internet Time is not geopolitical. It is global. In the future, for many people, real time will be Internet Time (Negroponte in Nickel, 1998).
Internet Time 'is a cute concept', as one commentator puts it (Khare, 2000), however it is not one that appears to hold up under critique.

On a purely practical level the system is of limited usefulness: a minute-and-a-half as a unit of measurement quite obviously lacks sufficient accuracy to challenge Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), not to mention the atomically measured Coordinated Universal Time (UTC). In addition, Negroponte's enthusiastic claims are inherently contradictory. If no day and no night exist in cyberspace, why, then, is Internet Time mounted on the existing sexagesimal system (the zero hour is marked according to 'Central European Wintertime') and anchored in terrestrial local time (each user 'converts' their local time to Internet Time)?

Considered thus, the creation of the Bieij meridian is far from agenda-free. As Dava Sobel (1996: 4) reminds us, 'any line drawn from pole to pole may serve as well as any other for a starting line of reference. The placement of the prime meridian is a purely political decision'.

What significance (if any), then, might we attach to Swatch Internet Time beyond the level of gimmick? To respond to this question it is necessary to broaden an understanding of the relationship between time and the Internet. When discussing the temporal nature of cyberspace, there are two broad conceptions of the notion of Internet time. The first describes the actual time of computer use. The second concerns the pace of change on the Internet and is linked primarily to e-commerce; as one article puts it, in predictably hyped terms, 'The Internet Economy is moving so fast that it hardly even has a past—only a confusing, exhilarating future'.

A further conception of Internet time, one that encompasses the first two senses, is theorised by Lance Strate as a critical supplement to the notion of 'cyberspace'; Strate (1996) labels this supplement 'cybertime'. While ostensibly documenting the various senses in which cybertime can be understood, Strate is primarily interested in revealing hidden discursive practices that attend the temporal aspects of computer-mediated communication. Given this project, it is not surprising that Strate conceives of cybertime largely in pejorative terms, linking it to Foucaultian notions of discipline and control.

Such a dystopian vision of Internet time is readily discernible in other ways. As an enabler of synchronous communications, Swatch Internet Time is preceded by 24-hour Greenwich Mean Time, the main continuing application of which is in the aviation industries and the military. 'GMT,' the Australian Military Forces Staff Duties manual states, 'is denoted by the suffix Z' (1966: 507)—otherwise designated as 'Zulu time'. According to a certain play of ideas, the 'z', as it is the conventional alphabetic terminus, permits a re-reading of 'Zulu time' as 'endtime' or 'apocalyptic' time.

This movement brings to mind Gregory Ulmer's application of the notion of 'nuclear criticism' in his own work on method. Ulmer (1989) utilises 'nuclear criticism' as a critical tool or aid in the invention of a genre through which to 'think electronically'. This he labels 'mystery': an electronic mode of discourse that unites three strands—the academic, the popular, and the personal.

Ulmer's application of 'nuclear criticism', and its connection with the personal, serves as a relay through which to mount a response to the earlier question: 'What significance (if any) might we attach to Swatch Internet Time?' Were we to conceive of the alphabet as an annular rather than linear structure, the 'z' in Zulu time could then be taken as a marker on a loop or continuum: a point of conclusion or point of
departure. Adopting the second position, I wish to rethink the creation of Swatch Internet Time, approaching it as an event through which to critically examine the site of everyday computer use in the context of globalised communications.

One of the more novel features of the Swatch system is the downloadable desktop beat-time calculator. While not overly remarkable in and of itself, the development of this mechanism highlights a fairly basic fact: time and space are inextricably entwined. The inescapability of this entwinement is given subtle treatment by Georges Perec in his novella A Man Asleep. In this tale, the anonymous central character, gripped by a debilitating torpor, is determined to escape the clutches of time, only to be endlessly interrupted, pulled back to the here-and-now by something familiar and prosaic within the space of his room, such as the ticking of a clock. 'You may have pretended to forget time ... but you couldn’t ever quite get away with it' (Perec, 1991: 220).

The lesson that can be extrapolated from this anecdote is that the issue of the intrusion of the everyday into the nether world of (globalised) computer-mediated communication is in itself significant, and highlights an important point of convergence. That is, synchronous computer-mediated communication occurs at a particular place: the interface between computer use and the space in which this use occurs. Otherwise put, computer-mediated communication and the endless flow of global informational and media vectors is a priori anchored in the flows of the everyday—the global is filtered through the local. (1)

This returns us to the epigraph that heads this piece, and the need, articulated by Perec, for an 'estrangement' of our conception of the spaces of the everyday—something made all the more urgent in the face of the potential de-spatialising effects of globalised, computer-mediated informational flows.

In other media discourses, the intrusion into or place of the everyday has been granted considerable significance. For instance, in much critical writing on television, the situation of the TV within the immediate physical setting of the domestic home is seen as fundamental to an understanding of television as a technology. That is, 'the character of a technology such as television is articulated through a network of formal, material, and social practices' (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 67). In recognition of this matrix, Altman (1987) theorises a domestic supplement to both the structural flow of television and global informational flows—what he terms 'household flow'.

A similar understanding needs to be brought to any examination of computer use. Fruitful critique of the issue of Internet- or cyber-time and global informational flows might emerge from within a more general study of computer use in the context of the everyday. In short: the everyday spaces in which we interact with computers.

Here we can draw on the Bachelardian notion of 'topoanalysis': 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives' (1994: 8). Such a study, however, should not be restricted to the psychological; ideally, it would be expanded to include anthropological, phenomenological, and physiological (including ergonomic) elements, to name but a few. Unifying these elements, to restate the situation, is an overall concern for an examination of the spatio- temporal organisation of our everyday engagement with cyberspace. Analysis of this kind might be enunciated from within the wider context of a 'critique of everyday life' (to use Lefebvre's phrase), or what Perec sees as a questioning of the 'infra-ordinary'. Perec (1999) is passionate about the need for such critique:
To question the habitual. But that’s just it, we’re habituated to it. We don’t question it, it doesn’t question us, it doesn’t seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren’t the bearer of any information. ... How are we to speak of these ‘common things’, how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are (210).

In German, this dialectical dilemma is captured in a single word:

what has been translated as “mysterious”, the German word “geheimnisvoll”, can assume the opposite meaning, “filled with the familiar, the home-like” (geheim, heimlich, heimisch). “Geheimnisvoll” can indeed mean both the familiar and the mysterious’ (Wright, 1984: 565)

As a way of ‘making strange’ the ‘familiar that is mysterious’, one of Perec’s own favourite textual props is the list. List-making as a practice has a long and rich history, extending back through Greco-Roman times (Matz, 1995) to the story of Noah and his Ark. Perec’s usage of the list is a kind of extended homage to Sei Shonagon’s Pillow Book (Morris, 1991) of the eleventh-century.

Lists vary enormously in both scope and intent. There are those lists that tend towards the monumental (such as the canonising of printed texts); Perec’s lists, in contrast, tend towards the banal or quotidian. Fascination with enumeration of this kind is most strikingly realised in his ‘Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Inurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Four’ (Perec, 1999: 244-249), and his later radio broadcast, ‘An Attempt at a Description of Things Seen at Mabillon Junction on 19 May 1978’ (Bellos, 1999: 640).

At very least, these experiments are a testimony to his ability to transform the trivial into the poetic—list-making as invent-ory. Importantly, however, in most cases Perec’s ‘accumulation is used in conjunction with other forms, devices, and intentions’ (Bellos, 1999: 670). Not the least of these is the deployment of the invent-ory as an effective lever with which to pry open for inspection the seemingly inscrutable inner workings of the everyday; this is in the hope that, as noted above, common things might ‘speak of what is [and] of what we are’ (Perec, 1999: 210).

The extent to which such a project might shed light on the spatio-temporal nature of everyday computer use is contingent on its ability to accommodate two further, interconnected developments. First, any examination of human engagement with computers and cyberspace needs to be considered, in Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) words, as it enters ‘into remediating relationships with a variety of other forms’ (81) of technology, ‘as part of a play of mutual remediations’ (82).

Secondly, by accounting for increased portability of computer technology. Computers are no longer stationary items, they are increasingly miniaturised and made mobile. There is the macro scale mobility of the laptop, which is supplemented by the micro scale of wrist and palm (‘palmtop’ and mobile phone with Internet connection). Capitalising on this two-fold movement, Swatch has released its wristwatch with dual time: ‘local’ time and ‘beat’ time.

Temporal relations with these machines thus become increasingly linked to our own
movement in time through space, whether this be in transit (city streets, train, plane, automobile) or at any of a number of possible destinations (home, car, office, library, hotel, transit lounge). The issue is then of the order of a phenomenology of transit; or, what Frow and Morris refer to as a ‘micrological discourse concerned with the politics of bodies in space’ (1993: xvii). But the question is how to construct such a discourse? How to make sense of computer-mediated communication that is made increasingly mobile?

The Situationist International and Fluxus provide explicit directions for how to proceed, in that both were global art movements involved in an ongoing (politicised) critique of everyday life from the perspective of mobility or dérive (on the Situationists, see Plant (1995), Blazwick (1989) & Sussman (1989); on Fluxus, see Friedman (1999). Both drew heavily on the process of mapping as a physical tool and conceptual device through which to explore their fascination with urban space, as did later conceptual artists such as Douglas Huebler and Daniel Buren. The Situationists are especially useful, though, in the way in which they ‘initiated topographical experiments connected to the revolution of everyday life and the production of psychogeographic maps that charted the sudden changes in ambience and distinct psychic atmospheres encountered while drifting in a city’ (Hollevoet, 1992: 33).

Psychogeography as a tactic holds particular importance here for two reasons. First, because it functions as an inverted version of Bachelard’s ‘topoanalysis’: an aleatoric exploration (‘play’) of the unknown sites of our public, mobile lives. And, secondly, because mapping is fundamentally list-making under another name—cataloguing in space and time. It is an attempt to construct an ichnographic inventory of urban spaces and human transport through them, either physically (as a graphical representation on a horizontal plane) or mentally (what Jameson refers to as ‘cognitive mapping’).

Moreover, in their engagement with the spaces of the city, what the Situationists and Fluxus (and other conceptual artists) have done is reconfigure art as a process of ‘becoming’:

The unique, durable art object created by the artist has been replaced by the concept of transience, by a continual shift between reality and representation, where the art work comprises the documentation of something that occurred in a specific place, at a specific moment in time, in actual reality [and conceivably, and simultaneously, in a ‘virtual reality’ (Hollevoet, 1992: 40). (2)

The significance for mapping is that it too is not seen as a means to an end (the map as a static entity), but as a process that is fluid, one that accounts for the mobile, the contingent and the transient: inventory as action and action as inventory.

Claims attending the invention of Swatch Internet Time, as previously stated, are for the facilitation of synchronous communications. But, the fact that its operation is linked to the interface of computer desktop and wristwatch serves to highlight that we still are yet to separate time from space at the local level. In the face of globalised communications, then, we cannot lose sight of the reality that cyberspace temporality is experienced from the local and, increasingly, from local mobility.

It is for this reason that psychogeographical mapping, as a form of list-making or inventory, may yet prove useful in better understanding the spatio-temporal organisation of everyday computer use.
Perhaps the compass of which Père writes is a mental rather than a physical one—a suite of psychogeographical tools with which to map our place in space and time. As mobile and technologically equipped contemporary dérivers, such cognitive mapping just might enable us to speak of what is, of what we are ... and of where we are.

The List

How can we speak of the common things that attend the everyday spaces of computer use?

There are precedents, of course: Père (1999: 144-147) has provided a list of the objects on his work-table ("Notes Concerning the Objects that are on my Work-table"); Barthes has done likewise, detailing his obsession with writing implements and the contents of his escritoire drawers, including the infamous 'Rib Chop' (Barthes, 1996: 61).

It is in the spirit of these efforts that I present my own humble offering, my own index rerum et verborum or 'list of things and words' (Manguel, 1997: 81).

An attempt at an inventory of the objects and things on and in close proximity to my computer desktop:

Let's start with what is in front of me...

- a Samsung 'SyncMaster 500s' screen (with antiglare overlay)
- a three-volume set of the National Trust 'Historic' series on which the screen sits to bring it up to a comfortable viewable height (a literal case of the present mounted on the past)
- a small card with illuminated text by Julian of Norwich, bearing the dictum 'All shall be well', blue-tacked to the top of the screen

moving clockwise...

- a matt black modem
- a portable tape-deck with Keith Jarrett 'La Scala' cassette playing
- a hard-drive; two-drawer filing cabinet (a very '80s, corporate, mid-range blue); printer atop

moving further right, back past myself typing these words, to...

- a keyboard, my fingertips on the keyboard
- an Oxford Concise (unlike Père, I don't possess a dedicated dictionary table)
- a Panasonic 'Digital Answering System' with perpetually stiff keypad
- a steel-grey desk lamp with flexible arm and long-life bulb; water bottle
- ambient traffic noise
- improvised tea/coffee coaster in the form of a miniature ceramic replica of the
fishes and loaves mosaic from the Church of the Multiplication on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (a gift)

- miscellaneous pencils, pens, whiteboard markers
- adjacent oversize whiteboard, including tangled palimpsest of jottings, reminders and other ancillary lists
- floating population of CDs, accompanied by the ebb-and-tide of paper that laps at what desk surface remains

returning to the computer 'desktop'...

- Character Map and other assorted 'shortcuts'; Swatch 'beat time' calculator;
- Andy Goldsworthy screen-wallpaper. (This backdrop brings to mind a friend's desktop, on which all the screen icons are arranged in a conch-like turbular fashion that Goldsworthy himself would approve of. Raised here is the whole issue of screen design and display, or what we might call the aesthetics of the interface - a topic deserving of its own list.)

Commenting on Perec's list-making, David Bellos remarks that 'The art of enumeration is not an easy one'; I take this statement to refer to what this art reveals as much as to how it is constructed. While doubtless less crafted and less poetic than those of my more illustrious French predecessors, my own hastily compiled inventory yields a number of useful things.

Here is one initial observation: time is not what I look at the most; it is also worth noting that Swatch time is only 'on' when the computer is on (unless I have a Swatch watch, which I don't).

Some additional thoughts are as follows.

First, the activities unfolding around this piece of equipment are frequently ritualistic in nature (witness: tea drinking, music appreciation); moreover, these activities can be pleasurable (tea and music, again), or at times potentially stressful (whence the need for Julian of Norwich's sage words).

Further to the above, and this is to state the deceptively simple, computer use is intertwined with a host of other media: telecommunications, whether via telephone or via modem, radio and other recorded music, whiteboard and printed page, or whatever.

Footnotes

1. Australian media critic McKenzie Wark is clearly cognisant of this fact as his written accounts of these vectors are frequently framed within the context of the local, and explored from the perspective of the personal. Ulmer, too, while it is not his immediate concern, would appear highly conscious of the convergence of the global and the local (the glocal) in his 'bringing into relation' the three strands of the expert, the popular and the personal.

2. As a further point of interest, it is worth remembering, in addressing the interconnectedness of computers with other technologies, that it was Fluxus participant Dick Higgins (after Samuel Taylor Coleridge) who developed the term...
'intermedia' to 'denote work whose structures determined the textures of the spaces between media' (Doris, 1999: 91).

Bibliography

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