



Living Room Totem of the Unsustainable

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One way to conduct research that could be used to inform more sustainable design of interactive technologies is to collect personal inventories of interactive technologies *in situ*. These may provide ways of understanding how, when and why we consume interactive technologies in unsustainable ways and could lead to insights for how to design otherwise I have begun with an inventory of my own immediate surroundings, in part because I know the history of the objects in my environment, but also given it was my particular love of interactive media that led me to a pattern of consumption often justified as professional interest but less often, if ever justified, as sustainable behavior – I should begin with an assessment of my role in the unsustainable before providing council to others as an act of politics to complement my research intentions. I suspect that starting with an “ultimate particular” can lead to insights about how to conduct personal inventories of interactive technologies on a larger scale.

The Inventory

My living room is home to a Totem of multi-media hardware fit for the Gods, should any ever see fit to drop by.

The installation is surely not very typical, integrating equipment and styles of interactivity that span twenty years. The picture of what is here does not adequately describe all that has been consumed in the service of interactive media at home – an account of what has been tried and discarded is needed to be complete. Such an account will reveal that the newest things in this environment have much shorter expected service lives than the older ones and that every fibre of the relationship of the use of this equipment to the machinery of enterprise is *designed* to make it harder and harder to preserve the old and more and more commonplace to consume the new with ever more frequency. Sadly, my own consumption of resources to support interactive media may make my car look more like an organic garden with respect to carbon footprints.

The crest of the Totem is my old Leica Pradovit P 2002 slide projector. Made of cast magnesium and Spanish optical glass, it is not plugged in and has not seen service in years. It was built to provide service lifetimes longer than its present obsoleted status has allowed, a victim of technological innovation. The Leica projector is beautiful. But it is unlikely to see much use again in the future by me. Important old slides are easily scanned to digital media where inexpensive, chemical-free redundancy serves as a better means of archival storage and where the ubiquity of digital projectors in lecture theatres makes slide projection a curiosity of ageing art history professors.

Here are some of the questions which owe to the reflection about the Leica slide projector and which may eventually serve as part of a framework for conducting personal inventories of interaction design practices: How do you view and store photographs? Which appliances do you use to do so? In which contexts do you view photographs? Do you view them alone or in a groups? Why do you view and store photographs, if you do?

Below the Leica is a hanging basket made from some old springs and a now inverted vinyl-covered metal holder for vinyl records. I keep DVD disks in it which I borrow from the library. They serve as marker and reminder for my ritual cycles of borrowing, renewal, and return. My hanging basket is a clever contrivance of external cognition, not at all bound to technology – at least not until such time as downloading high quality films takes less time than the few minutes it takes to exchange DVDs at the library.

Below still is a high-definition satellite receiver leased from the satellite television company. It channels messages from the Gods of Link TV, the Research Channel, University of California TV, the Fashion Channel in high definition – my spouse is a fashion designer, and Comedy Central – since Jon Stewart's news satire is in common belief better news than what passes as actual news in the US. It is the front line of reception for my religious addiction to media, connecting to a dish on the roof pointing skyward just as ancient peoples looked skyward to resolve their questions of

ontology. This receiver replaced an older receiver that was not high definition capable, only about a year ago. Like its predecessor, the receiver is a paragon of contempt for sustainable energy use – even when it is off, it is not off. The only way to get it to truly turn off is to unplug it and doing so comes at the expense of a not less than a fifteen minute start up procedure as the unit searches for satellite signals. The valve (vacuum tube) amplifiers I will describe below have much shorter start-up times.

Below still is the visual voice of the system, an Optoma 720p digital projector. Truly a gift from the Gods of online electronics stores, I can now count the pores on the face of anyone who dares allow her or himself to be broadcast in high definition and as an experience, it is truly awesome. The Optoma replaced a 480i Infocus projector less than a year ago when the cost of a replacement bulb made the purchase of the newer technology more sensible from a self-centered point of view than the maintenance of the old. *Mea culpa*. The Infocus projector which needs a bulb that costs more than its value is in the garage where it will likely remain until forever or the end of forever. This time, I purchased a warranty for the projector bulb for four years – still a far cry from the intended service life of the Leica projector and a far cry from forever. The one certainty is that the Optoma projector will become the shelf-mate of the Infocus projector sooner than I would like and later than the forces of consumerism would prefer.

Many additional items remain to be described as part of this spiritual journey of awareness into my own use of things, before I begin to take inventory of use by others – cables, a volume limiter,



Emily Carr, Heina (1928), National Gallery of Canada.¹



Living room totem of multimedia device.

a DVD player (~1 year old), a valve pre-amplifier (~12 years old), an analog tuner with a digital display (~20 years old), a record player (~20 years old) with a new motor (~2 years old), a laptop computer (~1.5 years old), three valve amplifiers (~12 years old), four cottage industry speakers (~10 years old), a screen, wireless internet, and a remote-control gas fireplace (it was “on sale” in the off-season and the gas line was already in place when I purchased the house – I believe it to be less polluting than a wood fire, actually). In a room that allows me to be everywhere connected, I have a long road to travel to come to terms with my own consumption.

Note

1. Accessed from http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork_zoom_e.jsp?mkey=9497 on 4.14.07.