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Comments for Week 7
Tangible Bits Link

I think the important thing to take away from the Tangible Bits papers is the overall idea of Tangible Bits. In speaking of this, I am superimposing the vision of the paper with the actuality of the Tangible Interface Group's work here and the reality of the implementation of that vision (within the confines of the Media Lab, of course). The idea that data can come in via peripheral channels was not exactly new at the time of its writing, but the important thing is that this paper made all of it concrete, and provided the examples necessary to make it possible for everyone to see the possibilities that existed therein. Likewise, the idea of augmenting everyday objects changed, in some sense. Tangible Interfaces as it stands today does not focus on simply augmenting everyday objects, but instead focuses on new interaction modes that call upon old and highly trained capabilities within all human beings. It is far from simple, and sometimes it might appear to be art or perhaps even contrived. General acceptance is somewhat difficult to garner, because like many other ideas, perhaps this work has not reached that critical mass of acceptance yet. That said, it is still one of the groups at the Media Lab that seriously focuses on rewriting the entire paradigm of interaction, and as with all new things, resistance is to be expected.

In some sense, Tangible Bits describes a vision parallel to the Ambient Intelligence vision. However, it is not as general purpose, and the interfaces themselves are thus less general purpose. I feel that such focus bypasses the problems that an interface designer deals with when using more generic interface modes. However, it also makes the systems much less robust against changing circumstances, and one must be constantly vigilant against creating a solution in search of a problem (the perennial problem in all interface design, sadly). I also think that Ambient Intelligence treats "ambient" both more and less generally than the paper. It is more general, in that there is no constraint to only peripheral channels, but instead to peripheral awareness of the availability of information, regardless of lack of physical manifestation. On the other hand, it is less general in that the availability of levels of information, and underlying detail, is more important in this definition. In fact, often times when we speak of just-in-time information, it is just this background awareness of ever-present information, and the hiding of the detail (ie, high level processing happening behind the scenes, but also the fact that the information is non-obtrusive) that we are talking of.