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**The Role of Risky  
Objects in an  
Internet of Things**

A growing amount of designers wants to create mediating objects that contribute to a participatory relation between people and space, like RFID toolkits, mobile augmented reality applications, often referred to as locative media or Internet of Things (IOT) applications. Raessens states that

Negotiated, oppositional, and deconstructive readings (more so than dominant ones), configuration and selection (more so than exploration), and construction (more so than reconfiguration) are all, in their own specific way, part of what I call participatory media culture. (Raessens, 2005)

Literature and expert interviews in the framework of my Phd research in the field of Cultural Studies suggest that risky objects offer a good framework for designers of IOT applications, since they trigger a kind of sociality which fits well in the definition of participatory culture.

Latour states that the Space Shuttle Columbia was a risky object on the moment of the disaster on February 1, 2003. It talked for itself, about the technical and organisational problems that led to the disaster, when it transformed from something complicated, automatic and autonomous into a more transparent rain of debris. The shuttle seemed silent and autonomous in a 'normal' situation, but became critical and a full-blown mediator in this context, putting a social situation under pressure, while stimulating alternative conversations about it (Latour, 2005).

Risky objects are mediated (risk) practices, mediating beginnings and ends of societal dynamics with

1) a huge potential for creative action (principle of agency by anticipation of risks), 2) [...] good and bad effects (principle of undecidability) and 3) [...] a highly demanding situation where communication, and with it the production and consumption of knowledge, is entrenched by non-knowledge, ignorance and unawareness (principle of uncertainty). Communication may also fail due to the 'tyranny of contingency' of things, which as self-made, risky objects may always refer to something else (principle of contingency). (Schillmeier, 2008)



**Fig. 1: Dataminded (2008)** Photo: by Toon Gorissen & Niek Kosten (Andries Vanvinckenroye, Anneleen Lantmeeters, Ellen Haemers, Kelly-Marie Ceglowski, Liesbet D'Hondt)

Risky objects only appear in re-collections, re-assemblies of objects, which opens them for alternative conversations, inviting participation by very diverse and unexpected groups of people. They are innovative mediators when their in-between, unfinished character and the tensions they cause between people and space are used in a constructive way, according to authors like Gaver (ambiguous design, 2003), Sengers (reflective design, 2005) and Brandes and Erlhoff (non intentional design, 2009).

Risky objects can be created via fiction, which can

bring – through the use of counterfactual history, 'thought' experiments and 'scientifiction' – the solid objects of today into the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense. Here again sociologists have a lot to learn from artists (Latour, 2005)

In the research project Hybrid City our institute ([www.socialspaces.be](http://www.socialspaces.be)) worked with the community in Genk to disclose the mining heritage of – what is called – the C-Mine site. Students designed a fictional augmented reality application that projected digital anecdotes and data over the physical space in the form of blurred and distorted video, sound and graphical material. The application explored the uncertain relation between the personal experiences of people and physical space, brought the physical site in a fluid state and offered an alternative to smooth looking heritage tours, using

a PDA. Commercial design appears to struggle with the unfinished, in-between aesthetics of risk, despite of its innovative potential. One of the cases in my Phd research, Touchatag, is an IOT application that enables people to create personal networks in their daily spaces between people and things. While the object (Touchatag) was conceptualised in a highly risky way, it appeared to be a challenge to guard the risk in the object in the process of launching it on the market.

We tried to offer a first glimpse on the possibilities of risk for good mediating objects in an IOT. Risky objects initiate a relation of tension between people and a current space and stimulate people to act, to create, change and recover particular encounters within this space in development. They offer an interesting perspective for participation in an IOT that is, however, not entirely acknowledged in the commercial design field.

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