Something to hold onto

By Marijn van der Jagt

The importance of weight and volume is seriously underestimated in the quest for ever smaller devices. Just as with a loved one, you want to have something to hold on to. The complaint that you can't slam down the receiver of a mobile phone after a frustrating conversation is not just a nostalgic one. Given this device is so important in everyday life, you also want to be able to put up a fight.

Nowadays you are punished by your own guilt when you furiously slam your phone down on the table: shocked, you immediately check if the poor thing still works. You can no longer take your emotions out on equipment, as all that remains is a feeble rebuke, as the American comedian Louis C.K. showed in his great sketch about phone users who rail against their providers for slow connection speeds. 'The signal goes through a satellite into space!' Louis C.K. yells at these frustrated 'time-managers', 'So you got a minute? It is a miracle of technology that you have in your hands. What have you actually performed in your life?'

This week it was announced that American scientists have developed a technique to use the human arm as a touchscreen for operating a smart watch. This method is necessary, as the buttons on the unit are so small that either the users can't see them or their fingers are too thick to operate them. This is news that will satisfy Louis C.K. Rage resulting from difficult communication with others, or a slow Internet connection, can now be vented on one's very own limbs.
The technique still needs improvement, according to scientists, because sweaty skin creates problems in the operation of the arm. Amusing images come to mind: limbs that have been abused by sharp nail imprints, chafed red 'rub' spots, or bruised memories of an angry pinch. Maybe this hitch in technological progress isn't so unpleasant. At least you have something to hold on to, albeit only your own body.

Removing the alienation

Someone wearing VR glasses seems to be shunning reality. The thick black goggles cuts the wearer off from their environment, and if there is a headset (replete with an alternative soundscape) then the insulation is complete. The body is still here, but the the eyes and ears have transported consciousness elsewhere. You can hear the cultural pessimists sighing, "yet another device that distracts people from the here and now".

But this scenario doesn't need to be the case. The virtual reality project, In The Eyes Of The Animals, created by the London art collective Marshmallow Laser Feast, has created VR glasses that ensure a much stronger connection with the environment "the wearer" is in. The project takes place in the middle of a wood, and the walk to it prepares the participants to experience a natural rather than an urban environment. An egg-shaped helmet, replete with a mossy "'eye", and a harness with a carapace turns the participants into science fiction figures; though the landscape they are "transported to" is, in fact, the wood they just entered. The wood itself is presented through the eyes of its inhabitants; namely, a mosquito, a dragonfly, a frog and an owl.

The “technocrats” in the artist collective have collected information about these particular insects and animals and translated them into “natural recordings”, from the creatures’ perspectives. Their work has created a magical experience of colours and textures; one which overrides any human perceptions. A mosquito, for example, experiences its environment through carbon dioxide, which it perceives as airborne particles. A frog is able to look both under and above the surface of the pond it swims in. The carapace used in. In The Eyes Of The Animals also gives the wearer of the VR goggles certain physical sensations; if the dragonfly flies, the wearer feels the vibration of the wings and if the frog croaks, the wearer feels the sound resonating through their upper body.

“We've had participants throwing off their helmets, howling”, said author and creator Ersinhan Ersin last week, at a presentation of the project in London. The VR successfully takes the participant to “somewhere else”, deep into the “world” of the wood. The overriding question raised by this project is therefore one of empathy. This latest technological game seems to have overcome the alienation between humans and nature. For, once you see how beautiful the shifting CO2 contours that configure a human body in the eye of a mosquito acually are, you have some notion of what a wonderful lifeform you try to kill in your bedroom.

Am I a robot or not?

Can a computer make you burst into tears? It certainly can if you're sat behind your screen ready to buy tickets for the concert of a favorite pop star, only to find that the system is overloaded, and the concert is sold out by the time you get through. A delaying factor is currently the additional check that ticketing programs insert to find out if you actually are human.

Smart operators can install robots on ticket sites that can buy up the cards quickly and in large quantities; bypassing the maximum quota of four purchases per person. Sometimes the counter-checks are amazingly simple. You get a pop-up screen, where you can tick a box to confirm the statement, “I'm not a robot.” Regardless of the philosophical implications round this complex issue, this check doesn’t feel a very secure one. A more trustworthy method is when the buyer must answer a question based on a mosaic of photos the size of a postage stamp. “On how many pictures can you see a mountain?”, is an easy one to carry out. “On how many pictures can you see farm machinery?”, is a lot less simple. And the question, “On how many pictures can you see a street sign?”, meant I had to begin over and over again because I knew nothing about street signs.

But a robot that hinders internet purchases is a blessing in other situations. In 2013, the children's charity Terre des Hommes launched a virtual girl trying to catch suspected paedosexuals online. The Amsterdam advertising agency Lemz helped design this chat-robot, disguised as a ten year old girl from the Philippines named ‘Sweetie’. Those attracted to young girls paid online to Skype with this robot. This payment was then recorded and passed on to Interpol. Thanks to this pilot project, Interpol have already convicted over a thousand paedosexuals worldwide.

This month, an enhanced version of Sweetie was brought out. Recently I heard an interview with her designers on the radio. The interviewer then contacted her, and her chat responses were read out. Essential to how Sweetie operates is that she does not provoke any paedophiles, because that is prohibited by law. “She's very patient” said its designer softly, who then said with some pride, “She can perform twenty chats simultaneously”. This computer girl has already made a lot of people cry. And I don’t mean the investigators involved in this project, who know exactly how horrific a practice

that attracts seven hundred thousand men at any time of the day - looking for a sexual partner of ten years or younger - is. Where the world can rejoice at the launch of Sweetie 2.0, is at the tears of the convicted ‘pleasure seekers’ and their associates.

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Bio

Marijn van der Jagt (1963) is a playwright and art journalist. She writes reflections for Vrij Nederland on theatre, television, films and thrillers (for example the annual Detective & Thrillergids).

She also works in the theatre as a playwright and director. She likes stories and scenes to slowly unravel and reveal themselves, and sees the use of tension as equally important in theatre and a literary thriller.

Colophone

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