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Comments for Week 5
The Coming Age Of Calm Technology

Since I read these in order, I will comment in reverse order. I have this strange feeling that we are at the point in a story where everything was going well, and then we have a problem. Things progressed well through the first two phases, but just as we were about to move to distributed computing... and then nothing happened. The web is not, despite what Weiser says, a distributed computing platform (yet, though Maeda is definitely working on it). Our "clients" are now as powerful as our "servers", but the clients remain clients, and the servers remain servers. The actual sharing of responsibilities and capabilities that was supposed to materialize never did. And indeed, we did get computers in everything, but they were microcontrollers... wonderful processors disconnected from the rest of reality. Of course, these problems are one and the same. The lack of ubiquitous connectivity and distributed function has caused the ubiquitous computers to be not-ubiquitous in the Mark Weiser sense. Additionally, while the paper does give some examples of "calm technology", extending the metaphor beyond those levels has proven to be quite difficult. There has, in general, been a lack of progress beyond the office window metaphor of making things ambient, and subsequently has caused a loss of interest in this promising area.

Perspectives article for ACM Interactions

"The world is not a desktop." I read that line, and my first interpretation was "The world is not a computer." In response, the ubicomp folks would like to say, "The computer is the world." Or, at least, that is the goal. Or at least, that is the goal until we reach the end, and then there comes the Mark Weiser blunder. By positioning his technologies as the answer to ubiquity, he has successfully led all his numerous successors to worry about how to put an edible microchip in my apple, instead of worrying about how to create a computational system that is as much a part of the world and every other part of the world already is. The perfect computer interface is not the magical interface, it is the interface that one would regularly forget to call an interface. One perfect example is the faucets in the media lab lavatories. We put our hands underneath, and water comes out. The water is not too hot or cold, and it doesn't spray. And we walk away when we are done, and it turns off. This is so not because there is a microcontroller in the faucet. This is so because the entire interaction model is perfectly intuitive and complete. This is the ubicomp that this paper is really pointing to, at least to me. (As a side note, the author clearly suffers from the same vision of agents that so troubled Ben Schneiderman. Perchance it is an artifact of the times.)

Ubiquitous Computing

After completing numerous slides about ubicomp, this paper seems to lack any new substance of note. I will be commenting on most of this tomorrow during my presentation of his paper.
