

Calm Technology

By Charlotte Freyne

In today's society it is difficult to imagine a world devoid of technology. In fact many of us would struggle to last a day separated from our smartphones or computers without our working, social and leisure lives collapsing. Whilst on the whole technology is often credited with making our lives easier and simpler, it can sometimes have the completely opposite effect, even if we don't realise it. Yet just by taking the time to think about the copious amount of alerts, notifications, alarms, reminders; and the continuous stream of, often unnecessary, information we start to realise that technology creates more stress than it does calm. There is however a way scientists and designers are attempting to tackle this problem and it may be surprising that in order to relieve this tech induced stress the answer is a new kind of technology.

This new era of tech, termed as Calm Technology by scientist Mark Weiser in his article *Designing Calm Technology* marks a shift from a focus purely on technological advancements to one where the harmonious relationship between humans and technology becomes the focal point. This is dominated by the belief that technology should not require all of our attention all of the time, instead just some of our attention and only when necessary. In turn the aim is to allow humans to command the technology they use rather than being dominated and burdened by it.

A major factor in the success of Calm Technology is in the use of the peripheral: that which we are attuned to but are not necessarily attending to. To explain the periphery Weiser refers to the noises we hear while driving. Typically our focus is on the road, the radio and our passengers and not on the noise of the engine. Yet if the engine were to make an unusual noise we would notice it immediately, attuning our attention in this direction. It is in this periphery that Calm Technology places itself, as something, which can be focused on when needed but equally requires no attention when working autonomously. Here not only does calm technology allow us to concentrate fully on fewer things, reducing stress levels but it enables us to make better use of our periphery making juggling tasks easier and calmer.

And while Calm Technology may seem like a recent innovation it's actually been part of all lives in some form or another for as long as we can remember. One of the simplest and most widespread examples of this is the kettle. Like all forms of Calm Technology the kettle requires our attention for initial instructions then works autonomously in our periphery alerting us only when it requires our input to finish the job. And while at this end Calm Technology can be very low tech it is also influencing the most up to date and most in demand technologies.

The recent rise in popularity of products such as robotic vacuum cleaners, sleep cycle trackers and apps which control your home appliances show a yearning for technologies that can help us accomplish our everyday goals and activities with the least amount of technological inference as possible, while retaining efficiency. Moreover, the recent rise of smart speakers like Google Home and Amazon Echo show Calm Technology's implementation of the familiar and the peripheral are very much on the minds of the world's leading designers.



Amazon Echo and Google Home¹

Even some of the most monotonous and potentially infuriating technological tasks are seemingly being eradicated through the implementation of Calm Technology. Online banking app *Simple* was born in 2009 out of a frustration with traditional banking processes and replaces the long phone queues and confusing websites with a simple interface where customers can text their queries to the customer service team who will get back to them with an answer.

The benefits of Calm Technology can be felt just as much by designers as it can be for us using it. Cyborg anthropologist Amber Case has produced numerous books and workshops on both the benefits of this kind of technology but also how and why designers should implement it. Case suggests that technologists who are producing bad interfaces, large amounts of coded data and complex systems are already suffering due to the minimal battery life and fleeting level of customer attention. Specifically Case references the failure of the recently launched Google Glass whose disrespect for social norms and overload of tech heavy features meant it didn't

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<http://www.techhive.com/article/3170841/home-tech/amazon-echo-and-google-home-want-to-replace-your-home-phone.html>

become a consumer favourite like it's follow up Google Home. Instead, Case proposes a future driven by Calm Technology that is elegant, human and unobtrusive and where *"A person's primary task should not be computing, but being human"*.

The influence of Calm Technology has also infiltrated the art world in the way we create and utilise art. One of the earliest works to reflect this calm or ambient technology is created in 1995 by artist and engineer Natalie Jeremijenko, under the guidance of Weiser. The work consisted of an eight-foot long plastic cable hanging from a ceiling mounted motor linked to a nearby Ethernet cable. Any information passing through the Ethernet cable was instantly fed to the motor causing the cable to move- tiny movements if the Internet network was



quiet and fast whirling movements if it was busy. While functioning as an artwork with aesthetic properties the placing of the cable in a hallway between offices allowed workers to easily monitor the speed and capacity of their network by listening for the sound of the moving wire, without constantly having to check or be alerted. This example allows office workers to retain their full visual attention to their work while in their periphery they can tune in to the sound of the whirling cable. On the other hand some artists are promoting the viability of Calm Technology by explicitly showing us the impact the current intrusive types of tech have in our lives.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of this is Keiichi Matsuda's 2016 concept film *Hyper Reality* which presents a dystopian future where our physical and virtual realities are merged.

So in a world where technology is part of our everyday lives and new innovations like artificial intelligence and robotics threaten to change the way we live and work Calm Technology is, for many, a welcome change. And if Weiser's prediction is correct that in a few years' time products like robotic hoovers and health monitors, which seem advanced now, may become just as commonplace as the toaster or the refrigerator seem today they're definitely here to stay: *"The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it."*

Further Reading

[Interview with John Seely Brown](#)

[Calm Technologies in a Multimedia World](#)

[The rebirth of calm: Why we need technology with manners](#)

[Designing Calm Technology](#)

[Keep Calm and Carry On: Calm Tech Changes Health and the World](#)