

Exploring Value Exchange through the use of Geolocated Conversational Agents

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There is currently major investment on the part of technology companies including Google, Amazon, and Microsoft to develop natural-language interfaces for digital systems. In particular, devices such as Amazon's 'Echo' are being positioned not only as media and shopping devices, but as platforms through which 'smart' Internet of Things (IoT) objects can be managed by users in a home environment. Given the complex, distributed nature of these systems, it is not entirely transparent to end users what speech (and consequently what data) is being recorded through these interfaces, how and where that data is being processed, and what the privacy implications of that data collection might be.

At CASA, we are currently exploring how we might help people understand the transactional character of these interfaces through the use of geolocated conversational agents, which take the form of bluetooth-beacon equipped garden gnomes. These gnomes invite users to contribute information about the place that they are in; however, as users converse with them, they learn also that their information is being recorded, shared with others, and with other gnomes in the agent network. In the workshop, we would be interested in working with participants to explore how natural language interfaces of this type might offer affordances for providing users with greater agency and awareness of how their data is being recorded and used in IoT ecosystems, and the transactional nature of such interactions.