Tactile Semiotics: The Meanings of Touch Explored

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Introduction
In my work I set out to verify the term Tactile Semiotics – the meanings we ascribe to different types of haptic sensations. Many researchers of haptic communication devices [2] are calling for a system of design parameters. As well as studying psychophysics, it may be beneficial to look at the cultural and social context of touch. It is possible to explore this field with the help of low-tech prototypes and methodologies more common in art and design.

Tactile Semiotics - Haptic Language?
Semiotics is the science of signs. Every language is a system of signs, and, to study the generation of meaning and communication effectively, it is important to be aware of semiotics. In semiotics theory, a coding system is existent in every media channel [4]. If we can familiarize ourselves with the codes of tactile semiotics, can we utilize them in haptic communication?

Haptic Box
Haptic Box, designed to investigate whether we associate emotional values with tactile experiences, contains ten different textures in a random sequence. They are felt with one hand, while the other hand fills out a Semantic Differential scale – a set of 12 pairs of polarized words rated from one to seven – to show the semantic link between the tested object and the subject’s mental imagery. A questionnaire about touch memories and associations is filled out afterwards. There is indication of a correlation between natural materials more than synthetic ones.

PinKom
PinKom is a mock-up prototype of an imaginary haptic device, designed to study the potential of haptic communication. Haptic expressions are envisaged in the form of a shape display. The PinKom will be used by couples in a love relationship for at least a week. Spontaneous forming of communication codes shall be monitored. We will gain insights into the real uses this new touch-based communication device would be put to. Using a mock-up prototype rather than a functional one, this is an example of the benefits of low-tech prototypes for quick user evaluation.

Conclusion
A mix of approaches and ideas [5] will help to build evocative interfaces using metaphor, semiotics and suggestion, resulting in an active, participative and imaginative interactive process - which so far has been most successful in creating a meaningful experience for the user [3].

References