

# Commentary

For alt.chi paper  
*ChamelonMask: Embodied  
 physical and social telepresence  
 using human surrogates*

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At an event called Stupid Hackathon, held in New York in early 2015, one creation was called *iPad on a Face*. It was “a telepresence robot, except on a human” (www.stupidhackathon.com).

Enabling a remote person to use a human surrogate in a mobile telepresence system is an idea I find troubling. What would it be like to interact with someone via a human surrogate? What would it be like to be that surrogate? These questions are provoked by systems such as *ipad on a face*, but to answer them requires real world user trials.

A decade ago Sheridan et al. (Understanding Interaction in Ubiquitous Guerrilla Performances in Playful Arenas, Proc. British HCI, 2004) went some way towards answering such questions. The *Schizophrenic Cyborg* was a wearable system that enabled someone to interact with a remote person via a display attached to a third person’s chest. The system was trialled in nightclubs. Sheridan found that the remote person would engage in playfully awkward interactions, such as asking people to give the wearer a hug. The experience for the wearer was, understandably, disconcerting.

More recently, Reeves et al. (I’d Hide You, Performing Live Broadcasting in Public, Proc. CHI 2015) have explored a mixed reality game *I’d Hide You* in which runners broadcast video, enabling remote players to direct them around a city in an attempt to capture other runners. The runner is not a surrogate in quite the same way as the other systems, but a similar dynamic occurs with the runner working with and for co-present and remote others.

Misawa and Rekimoto’s ChameleonMask has similarities with these other systems. However, ChameleonMask has not been trialled in the playful context of a game or nightclub, but in ordinary situations. Moreover, the situations in the trial are ones in which identify and presence are topical and practical matters for those present. Firstly, a government official, when presented with an identify document by someone wearing the ChameleonMask, is put in a situation where he must decide whether it is the surrogate or the remote user who is actually presenting the document. Secondly an elderly woman, when visited by a family member via a surrogate wearing the ChameleonMask, has to decide whether to orient to this visit as one by a family member or by a stranger. As such the two studies are akin to the breaching experiments discussed by Crabtree (Design in the Absence of Practice: Breaching Experiments, DIS 2004). The trials address the interactional troubles provoked by the system by its breaching of the norms of identify and presence.

Conducting studies such as these, particularly when outside of the context of games and playful arenas, does pose ethical challenges. How far can or should we go when breaching social norms? The visit to an elderly woman is a challenging example. Clearly connecting grandmothers and granddaughters is an important area of research for HCI, but we do need to be careful and respectful when creating uncomfortable and disconcerting experiences. As this study affirms, it is not just the surrogate that has a potentially uncomfortable experience, but also those they interact with.