Fred Scharmen

Home Tweet Home

When Tom Coates comes home, his house greets him. "Welcome home, @tomcoates!" the house says, not just to Coates himself but also to the other 1,399 people who follow the house on Twitter, at the handle @houseofcoates.[1] Coates is a product designer who writes about social software. His San Francisco home uses a network of sensors to gather data on the activity and conditions around it – temperature, weather, internal motion, and Coates's social media posts – and inserts them into templates to compose tweets. When the thermostat registers a temperature in the upper 60s, the house announces with satisfaction, "It's just hit 68 inside – that's rather lovely. I'm pretty sure Tom will be happy about that." If the thermometer reading starts to climb into the 70s, however, the house complains: "It's getting warm in here today. I'd say it's probably reached something like 72. That's a little warmer than I usually like it."

The house's voice is thus part hard information, part ventriloquism. The house's sensor network detects conditions, and Coates writes the narrative scripts that frame this "sensory" data. In these constructions, the house becomes more than an inert object. Since the messages are coauthored by Coates's scripts and the house's sensors, @houseofcoates serves as a proxy for Coates's personality. When the house tweets, "I'm pretty sure Tom will be happy about that [temperature]," it implies access to its occupant's subjectivity. Qualifiers like "I'd say," "a little," and "usually" foreground the house's authored personality, and offer opportunities for engagement with others. Even though the parameters are all known, Coates nevertheless feels that he gets more out of it than he has put in. "It's deepened my emotional relationship with my house," Coates said, when asked, via Twitter, about this kind of interaction. "I look after it, and it looks after me."[2]
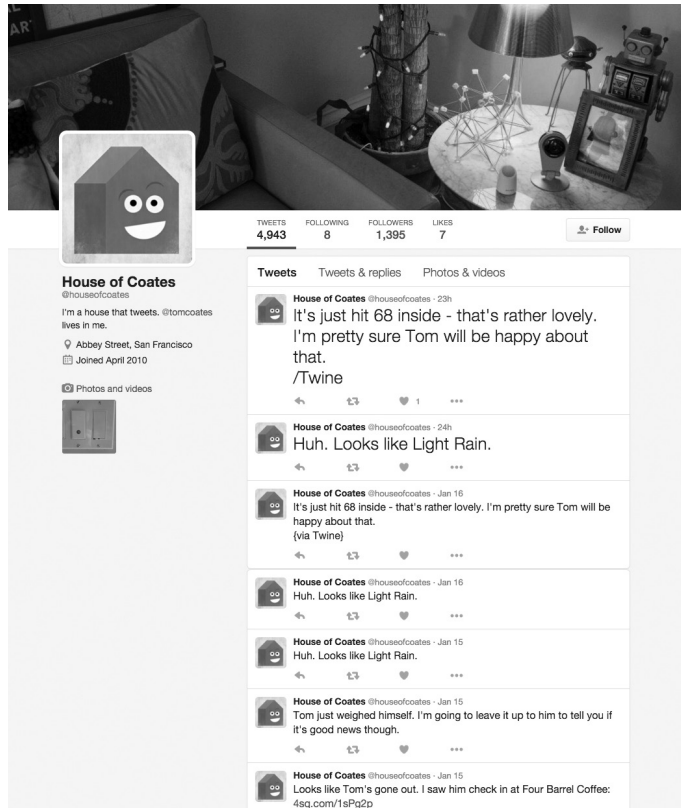
Charlene McBride, a user-experience designer and artist, has wired her Boston-area loft with sensors and given it a Twitter account, @loftsonate,[3] which talks to her personal account, @ursonate. "It was getting dark so I turned on the light at August 26, 2015 at 08:49PM. Now @ursonate won't walk into the wall." Compared to the earnest enthusiasm of

1. House of Coates (@houseofcoates), Twitter feed, accessed October 4, 2015, https://twitter.com/houseofcoates. The bio for House of Coates reads, "I'm a house that tweets. @tomcoates lives in me."
2. Fred Scharmen (@sevensixfive), Justin Pickard (@justinpickard), Tom Coates (@tomcoates), and Charlene McBride (@ursonate), Twitter exchange, January 15, 2015, http://twitter.com/ursonate/status/555797178682466304.
3. "A connected space in Lowell, MA," loftsonate (@loftsonate), Twitter feed, accessed October 4, 2015, https://twitter.com/loftsonate.

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@houseofcoates, McBride's loft is sarcastic. It reminds her to brush her teeth before bed and chastises her if it doesn't like the results when she weighs herself on the house's network-enabled scale. The house's nagging creates a playful context for McBride and her house to interact while bugs in the sensor network are still being ironed out. If one of the sensors malfunctions, causing the lights to turn on and off randomly in the afternoon, McBride often mocks the house right back. "The nagging thing is funny," she told me on Twitter, "sometimes it lies."[4]

4. Scharmen, Pickard, Coates, and McBride, Twitter exchange, January 15, 2015.
5. Charlene McBride, e-mail message to the author, October 4, 2015.

Both @houseofcoates and @loftsonate are public accounts that can be followed and read by anyone. McBride keeps her house's account public in order to share technical information about the project's development and inner workings. "If there is someone out there who wants to learn from it, then I want it to be available for them," she wrote in an e-mail.[5] She acknowledges that this publicness entails security risks (for example, someone might be able to infer when she leaves the house and break in). But the information the house broadcasts is presented as subjective observation, thus clouding the windowpane between public and private. When the house's

motion sensors are activated, @loftsonate tweets, "Movement was detected in the entryway at: October 03, 2015 at 09:38AM. is that @ursonate or the cats?" The public message tags McBride's Twitter handle, triggering a notification on her smartphone, but for anyone else reading, the tone is casual and the information is ambiguous. It might be the cats, or McBride herself, home after all.

When I visited Tom Coates at his house in the summer of 2015, I found not only that the house looked nothing like its profile picture on Twitter – an archetypal pitched-roof icon with googly eyes and a cartoon smile – but that it has no front facade at all. The house, which sits at the center of the block, is entered through a gated courtyard facing the alley. Lacking a designed presence on the street, the house doesn't communicate with the city in a traditional architectural sense. Rather, it is through social media, that the house addresses itself to the outside world. The historical function of the facade as a mediator between a public street and a private interior has been outsourced to the house's digital presence.

For Coates, the house's presence on Twitter collapses the distance from home when he is traveling: "There's always a part of it with me when I'm away."[6] This sense of place and presence is bound up with, but distinct from, familiar spatial metaphors of homepages and links: "That sort of telepresence sense is interesting to me – like its [*sic*] extended itself into the mirror world . . . And in that space, physical presence is less of an issue. But differently from the internet generally because I'm always aware that it's in a particular place, which I'm not for a web page." It is this extension that allows the house, in Coates's words, to "be with me and far away at the same time." McBride seconds the idea that an online house is always present, or at least represented: "Sometimes I feel like I'm pulling out wallet photos when I tell people about it."[7]

6. Scharmen, Pickard, Coates, and McBride, Twitter exchange, January 15, 2015.
7. Charlene McBride, Twitter direct message to the author, January 15, 2015.

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