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Objects of Storytelling and Digital Memory (MEMO)

Patrick McEntaggart & Fabio Fragiaco

Abstract

Memories can be formed around contact with physical objects that populate our everyday lives, we make sense of the physical world by the memories we create. We can create levels of understanding in relation to objects by organising significant memories into stories that hold meaning. The story of an object can involve the story of the personal relationship people have with it, the object can be a trigger on more than one level.

In this project the physical, acts as a bridge to the virtual to provoke memory and sometimes instigate new memory formation in relation to an object. The artefacts of collective digital memory are accessed and rearranged through interaction with objects, the performance of this interaction gives space in which memories and stories about the objects and virtual artefacts can form. Physical manifestations of meta-data are used to create an unconventional interface to a database of existing memories. This paper seeks to frame the project theoretically and describe the resulting piece of work.

Key Words: Digital Memories, Flickr, Physical Interface.

1. Digital communities and collective memory

Online communities and social media now form a large part of the virtual experience for most users, users congregate in these virtual spaces to share media artefacts and information. Social networking sites, in particular those based around media sharing such as Flickr have become part of the “infrastructure” of new media¹ becoming synonymous with the practice of storing and sharing photographs. Ask most users how to share video and YouTube will inevitably form a part of the response, ask about photographs and Facebook or Flickr features, they inhabit and in many cases define the landscape of new media for most users.

In the case of Flickr it is used for storing images from important political and cultural events taken by official bodies to those of individual users who may also upload and share memories of these events as well as events in their lives, from the trivial to the poignant and very personal. What was once a private practice has become public, driven by a compulsion to record in what Andrew Hoskins describes as “post scarcity” feeding a

memory boom. This recording and sharing is central to creating a new type of memory as Andrew Hoskins puts it “digital network memory”² where the private and public memories exist in closer proximity, inhabiting databases where the lines are ultimately blurred.

These online databases support a notion of collective memory much like that which is described by Halbwachs³ The shared objects of memory can be accessed and recalled by any member of the network thus memories go beyond the boundaries of the initial users who generated them and there is opportunity for new memory formation. These new memories are generated through the interaction and interconnectivity offered by a database structure and the behaviour of users. “where natural social collectivises build connectivity out of memory, virtual communities build memory out of connectivity.”⁴

2. Memory sharing

It is possible to understand the desire to share in an online community by mapping the activity to traditional habits and practices. The sharing and interactions of memories in online communities reflects the vocalisation and sharing of memories that takes place through language. By connecting with others and sharing we increase the chance of preserving a memory, we use the act of vocalising the memory as a tool to help reinforce it⁵. Memories told to others as stories contextualise the information in the pattern of a story, increasing the chances of the recipient recalling it and thus preserving it. Stories are a memory process⁶ which we use to encapsulate the important details for preservation. This process is done using language, however since the advent of consumer cameras people have used photographs to aid this and capture the details of an event through images. Digital cameras and camera phones have amplified this behaviour, methods of storing these artefacts use fragments of narrative to contextualise and describe them from descriptions to keywords and other meta-data.

Flickr asks us to “Tell a story with your photo” encouraging users to add detail to images such as location, names of people, keywords (tags) and descriptions. The details provided by the user contextualise the image, this often weaves it into a story that evolves with each image in a collection. Also, the story of a user evolves in time through the “photostream”, this is a memory stream that is available to other users who follow or choose to access the stream of another user. The act of uploading and adding contextual information echoes the telling or vocal sharing of memory that takes place in language where narrative increases memorability.

3. **Interfacing the database**

The monolithic narrative structures of old media are not applicable in this new media landscape of the database as the fragmented narratives can be accessed by other users who in turn create interpretations of their meaning as they traverse this digital unconsciousness. Thrift⁷ describes the software that mediates and supports this online environment as the 'technological unconscious', this software is the gate through which we access these memories bringing them into our consciousness, thus mediating the experience of recall, it also allows us to log off from these memories and resign them to our digital unconsciousness.

Online media sharing sites are in essence large databases that allow the storage of media elements, while Manovich⁸ asserts that the database fights for the same space as narrative and exists in direct opposition he also concedes that they support narrative. Whilst it can support it, the user must play a part in the formation of this narrative through their interactions. The relationship between the user and the database elements relies on software and algorithm to mediate and frame it, this is not fixed making the relationship cybernetic⁹ Although there is the possibility of arbitrary trajectories through the database there is also the possibility for new structures of meaning as users respond and recall in relation to the fragments they are presented with on screen.

The screen is defined by Andre Nusslder¹⁰ as a psychological space where the interface is described as that of a fantasy in Lacanian theory. This project seeks to go beyond the fantasy by using a physical interface, although the artefacts of cyberspace in this case photographs, remain bound by the screen. The images are detached from their original context in a state of virtualization remediated in a new digital context.

4. **The project**

The project MEMO (Memory Objects) referred in this paper is an interactive installation consisting of a screen, a computer running bespoke software and a physical interface involving a box containing five jars filled with objects.



The project can be described in four parts: the database (formed by the unconscious participants), the software (memory framing and retrieval), the interface (the physical installation) and the conscious end user. It seeks to create a bridge from the end user to digital memories of passive participants who commit material to online repositories. The bridge is created by the software and unconventional physical interface that seeks to disrupt users existing notion of interface.

The project draws on the Flickr database of photographs for screen based content, this database provides access to an existing repository of memory objects that is diverse and continually updating. The users of Flickr are unconscious participants in the project providing images and also meta-data that gives a window into their own memory and stories in relation to images. The original meaning of the images is found within the meta-data

and descriptions, however this is physically manifested in the form of objects within the jars.



These jars are generally themed around creativity but each one focuses on a particular strand. The strands are play/games, photography, music, writing and drawing. Each one is described by a number of search terms that consist of keywords or phrases defined by the author of this work, one is chosen randomly each time a jar is lifted to vary the outcomes. The varied and sometimes obscured content within the jar encourages discovery physically but also a discovery of their personal memories. The content is a catalyst for user's memory and for the software, which searches the database and serves up sequences of images, which can also be a catalyst for the user to recall or create further memories whilst observing the diversity and contrast the images on screen with their own interpretations.

The physical manifestations of the meta-data in the form of the jars and objects serves to allow the users a way to connect those artefacts more easily with the real world and real experience. Although the images exist on a screen, the meta-data and the performance of interaction is moved from this virtualization into the physical world

In this project the interface seeks to externalise aspects of user interaction and promote long-term memory formation. Media memories or “imagined memories” are more easily forgotten than lived memories¹¹ in contrast to a real event what we experience on screen has a lower physical involvement and the actions we use are generic to many on screen activities. The universal interfaces we use give us access but also create a barrier for a more memorable experience, a click of a mouse can serve up a family album or help us discover footage from a historical event but the action is indistinguishable. Touching the glass of a screen gives us a more natural physical interface but its universal nature restricts its memorability, to do it once is memorable, after many hundreds of times it becomes indistinguishable and consequently a flat physical experience limited in scope to enhance the memory of a digital experience. In this project there must be physical interaction from the user to sustain the flow of images, if a jar is replaced the screen returns to the user prompt, thus promoting contact and imposing a physical interaction through the users period of use. In contrast to standard methods of searching a database this method introduces a more tactile experience.

By mediating the images and staging them in a new context the project distorts the traditional notion of sender-to-receiver model of communication. The user must bring their own interpretations to the objects to create anchorage and frame the photographs with a new meaning. This new meaning is formed from a collaborative effort from the users of Flickr through to the author of this piece and its end users.

“The established differences between author and reader, performer and spectator, creator and interpreter become blurred and give way to a reading writing continuum that extends from the designers of the technology and networks to the final recipient, each one contributing to the activity of the other.”¹²

5. Conclusion

Within this work the author surrenders a degree of control over the content by using “algorithmic editing”¹³, while there is a degree of control in the refinement of the search terms there is room for unexpected results. Allowing the experience of the end user to be unique and sometimes surprising, giving a new perspective on the physical objects and photographs displayed

By committing our memories to a shared repository we contribute to a collective and connective memory, a memory stored by one user in a

collective unconsciousness can become a part of another user's consciousness and form a new and unexpected memory narrative. Within this landscape notions of ownership and authorship become blurred, new definitions are called for to describe the complex relationships between all the players.

Notes

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² Hoskins A, 'Digital Network Memory', in 'Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory', edited by Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney. Walter de Gruyter, 2009, pp. 91-106

³ Halbwachs M, 'The Collective Memory', Harper & Row, New York, 1980

⁴ Appadurai A, 'Archive and Aspiration', in 'Information Is Alive: Art And Theory On Archiving And Retrieving Data', NAI Publishers , 2003

⁵ Mayer-Schönberger V, 'Delete: The Virture of Forgetting in the Digital Age', Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 27

⁶ Schank R, 'Tell me a story: a new look at real and artificial memory', Scribner, 1990

⁷ Thrift, N. "Remembering the Technological Unconscious by Foregrounding Knowledges of Position." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22.1, 2004

⁸ Manovich, L, 'The Language of New Media', MIT Press, 2001, p. 225

⁹ Nusslder, A, 'Interface Fantasy a Lacanian Cyborg Ontology', MIT Press, 2009, p. 5

¹⁰ Nusslder, A, 'Interface Fantasy a Lacanian Cyborg Ontology', MIT Press, 2009, p. 5

¹¹ Huyssen A, 'Present pasts: urban palimpsests and the politics of memory', Stanford University Press, 2003, p.17

¹² Lévy P, *Collective intelligence: mankind's emerging world in cyberspace*, Plenum Trade, 1997

¹³ Manovich, L, 'Soft Cinema: Concepts', Manovich, Available at http://www.manovich.net/cinema_future/sc_concepts_full.html (accessed 02 2012)

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