Reminiscence as Performance

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Abstract

Ethnographic investigations of the uses of digital photography in the home have revealed a number of insights into the practice of reminiscence. These findings illuminate key differences between reminiscence and other forms of interaction with digital media, and between reminiscence and storytelling. These differences suggest a new approach to supporting reminiscence as an interactive performance.

Keywords

digital media, digital photography, reminiscence, ethnography, performance, storytelling

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 [User Interface]: Theory and methods, User-centered design, Interaction styles

General Terms

Human factors, theory, design

Introduction

In the course of studying the use of digital photography in the home over several years, reminiscence has emerged as an activity that has not been fully addressed or supported by the HCI community. Currently available technologies as they are conceived and used in the mainstream do not support reminiscence particularly well.

We are looking at reminiscence from two perspectives, ethnography and performance, to better understand the social aspects of reminiscence with the goal of envisioning new designs to support this practice.

Design Ethnography

Our interest in reminiscence has emerged not from any technological breakthroughs but from witnessing the struggles of people adapting to the challenges of curating, managing and interacting with their digital media in the home. The most powerful finding from our observations to date is that reminiscence is not a goal-driven activity to be conducted with the assistance (or hindrance) of a home computer. Even if one were to overcome problems such as getting half a dozen people or more in easy reach of a monitor to point out people of interest in a photo [3] or allowing more than one person to control the flow of images [4], one would not address either the nature or the requirements of reminiscence. Using the language of Kirk et al, one does not sit down to accomplish a discrete photowork task titled 'reminiscence' [7] with one's photos.

It is also important to remember that reminiscence is based on a very intimate phenomenon, that sensation of recognising a particular place or event as belonging to our set of life experiences. Without this sensation, any 'memory' is simply a description. In line with past findings, this deeply personal perspective underscores the need to move beyond the technologically oriented viewpoint of seeing reminiscence as one end use in the process of image (or sound, or video) capture, preparation and consumption [3]. A possible framework for a new direction is to view reminiscence as an act of performance.

Performance

We look at reminiscence with others as an opportunity to spend time in the creation of a conversational, participatory performance. These performances are often serendipitous, prompted by accidental discoveries or the luck of walking past a family member while she uploads or backs up some photos [4]. For groups of people, 'reminiscing talk' [3] is the heart of the act of reminiscing, whether this is prompted by a physical object or a digital artefact. Conversations tend to involve many or all members of the primary speaker's audience, especially those who see themselves in a photo or who participated in an event brought to mind by a photo or memento, creating a type of 'collective remembering' [10]. For those who reminisce alone, the time spent in this activity can contribute to autobiographical memory and sense of self in relation to others [9]. In both cases, reminiscence is a popular, often joyful and socially important act [3].

It has become increasingly common for the social sciences to define almost any social activity as performance. We have seen for ourselves that the act of reminiscing with a group of people involves choices of topic, phrasing, gesture and tone that depend on the composition of the group and the way in which the speaker wishes to present himself. This indicates 'recipient design' [3], in line with Goffman's observations on the ways in which people alter their words and behaviours for different audiences [6]. There are any number of possibilities for creating applications to support such collaborative performances.

The Temptation of Story

Goffman's insight that all social actions are infused with performativity opens up reminiscing talk to

interpretation as a performance. One might then construe the content of the reminiscing talk as a series of stories. An interaction designer thinking along these lines might seek to support reminiscence by availing herself of the insights of digital storytelling as developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling in California [8], the Centre for Storytelling at the University of Glamorgan [5], and others.

While reminiscence can be construed as performance, and performances often involve the relating of stories, it is important not to equate reminiscence with storytelling. They are very different phenomena, distinguished by the audience for the story – or, more broadly, talk – triggered by a prompt. Reminiscing takes place when some members of the audience were present at the time the photo or other artefact was made. Storytelling occurs when some members of the audience do not know the story. A framework for this distinction appears in Figure 1.
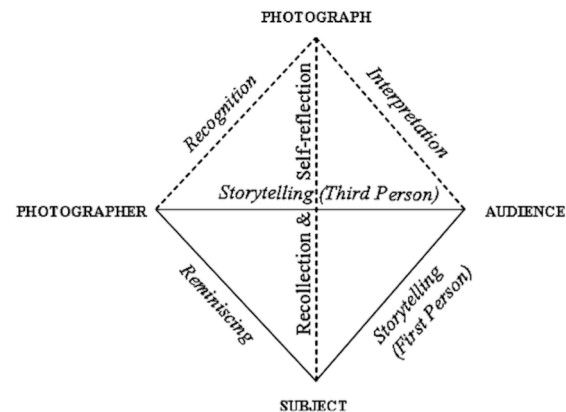

Figure 1. The diamond framework for domestic photography. Figure 3.5 in [1].

It is also important to remember the highly participatory nature of the kind of storytelling that tends to occur in reminiscing talk, with multiple speakers overlapping each other [2]. Attempts to use HCI to support storytelling in the sense of a single teller of a single narrative to a mostly passive audience are likely to miss any number of opportunities to address the dynamic, multi-teller nature of reminiscing talk. Those attempts might also miss the differences in purpose between regular storytelling and reminiscing talk: a key purpose of storytelling is to share the experience, while a key purpose of reminiscing is to recall detail [3].

These different purposes suggest that interventions suitable for one might not be suitable for the other. For example, a common method of conveying a story using digital media is to create a sequence of photographs with voiceover narration. However, findings from ethnographic research indicate that people tend to reminisce over a single photograph rather than a sequence of photographs [2]. They also tend not to speak while a narration is being played back [2], preferring ambient sound or music that does not inhibit the free play of the reminiscing talk. It is possible that further, more targeted investigations will find similar contradictions between the assumptions governing storytelling and reminiscing.

Part of the potential problem in thinking of reminiscing as a type of storytelling involves the broad scope of definitions and connotations within the term 'story'. One might use the term to cover everything from notes that prompt memory, to the telling of an anecdote, to a polished and marketable piece of writing. It could help to clarify the nature of reminiscing talk as opposed to –

and sometimes inclusive of – conversational storytelling. A framework for this definition is presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3.
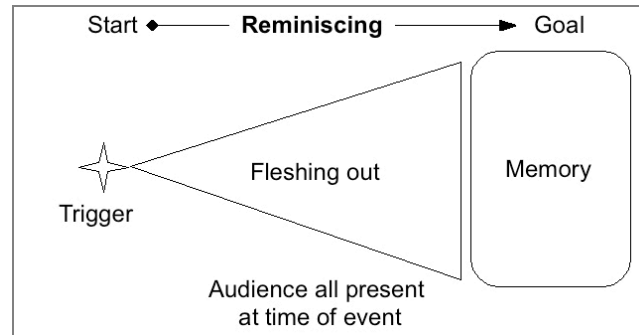

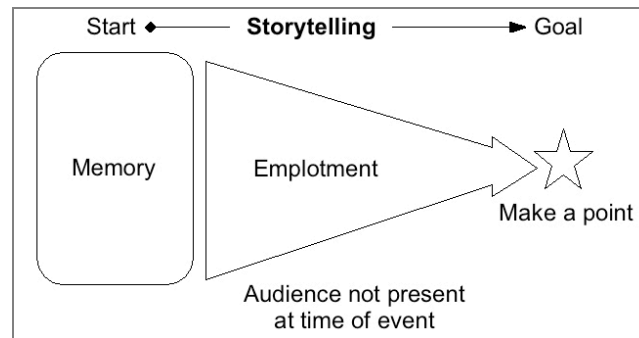Figure 2. Reminiscing, leading to detailed memory.

Figure 3. Storytelling, leading to a point.

Here, reminiscing talk in its purest form involves only people who were present at the event brought to mind by a trigger. Examples of triggers include the serendipitous discovery of a photo in an archive or a comment made by another person in the group. From this trigger, the group will talk about a memorable event either represented or suggested by the trigger. Parts of this conversation may take the form of one or more stories. The goal of the group is to spend time fleshing out their memory to the extent that is possible or desirable.

The end point for the reminiscing process is the starting point for the telling of a story to people who were not present at the event in question. In the purest form of that case, the teller attempts to describe the event and thereby make some sort of point, which could include sharing wisdom, displaying status, educating, or conveying a feeling or experience [3]. In any case, the memory is not the goal but the starting point.
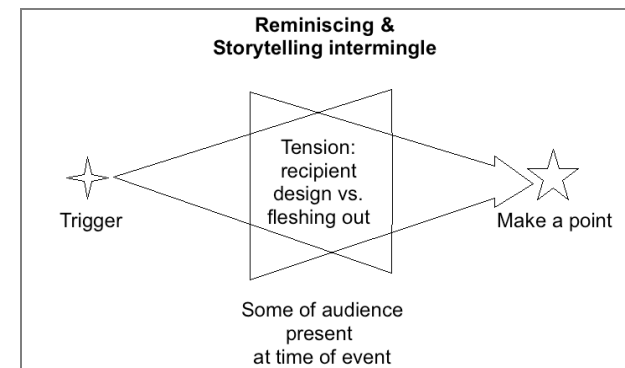

Figure 4. Mixed-audience reminiscing.

Of course no one expects human experience to sit neatly within these restrictions. A memory can come more fully alive and details crystallise during the telling of the story, and it is very possible that the way in which we emplot our own stories helps trigger certain

Figure 5. Audiophoto desk.

Figure 6. Reminiscing radio.

Figure 7. Family hedge.

details. The process of discovering memories associated with a trigger can prompt a person to tell a story, which in itself can bring on new or more detailed memories [2]. This muddying of the waters is all the more evident in mixed groups, where the impulse to tailor our words to our audience competes against our impulse to recall and share additional details.

It is precisely these tensions that indicate storytelling is a possibly fruitful but ultimately incomplete means of approaching reminiscence.

Novel Reminiscing Technology

In our research group and projects we have been developing and exploring a number of novel technologies for supporting reminiscence and storytelling. At the workshop, we will consider how each of these supports the performative aspects of reminiscing, based on the framework above.

Audiophoto desk (Frohlich, Clancy, Robinson & Costanza)
This plays back sounds associated with printed photographs placed on its surface. Multiple 'audioprints' can be played at the same time, and their stereo and volume attributes 'mixed' by movement along the x and y axis of the desk.

Reminiscing radio (Lim & Frohlich)
This allows users to review spoken life history fragments by 'tuning' into particular years and dates. Music of the era begins to play in the background and stories from different members of a family can be played in the foreground and compared with each other.

Family hedge (Marshall, Wallace & Wood)
This comprises a wall hanging on which to attach miniature profile photos of living people in an extended-family tree or 'hedge'. A radio-frequency identification (RFID) sensor wand and box then allow users to associate spoken stories with profile photos, precious objects and cards placed on the surface of the box.

Conclusion

Current norms and standards of digital media pose challenges for supporting reminiscence. We see potential in working with the creation and accessing of reminiscence triggers as well as the performance of acts of reminiscence, both individually and in groups made up of those who were present at the event in question as well as those who are hearing its story for the first time.

The authors offer an extensive background in design ethnography focused specifically on the realm where reminiscence often takes place: photography in the home. We also bring a performance perspective that values the time spent in enjoyment, reflection, and representing feelings and experiences through conversation. We are eager for feedback on this perspective and want to encourage similar approaches that are ethnographically rather than technologically driven.

Acknowledgements

Author backgrounds

Jocelyn Spence's educational background has focused on narrative in a variety of media, with an undergraduate degree in Radio/Television/Film from Northwestern University and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans. Meanwhile, her career has led from early work writing and designing for the Web, to e-learning design, to user experience design and information architecture. Jocelyn is pursuing a PhD through the Digital World Research Centre and the Department of Dance, Film & Theatre at the University of Surrey, studying live digital storytelling.

David Frohlich is the Director of Digital World Research Centre at the University of Surrey and Professor of Interaction Design. He joined the Centre in January 2005 to establish a new research agenda on user-centred innovation for the consumer market. Current work includes a mixture of PhD, Industrial and Research Council projects on future photography, future literacy and future communication technologies. He also teaches an MSc module on Interaction Design for the Department of Computing.

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