Legacy Construction through Digital Imagery

Diana Kim  
California College of the Arts  
1111 8th street  
San Francisco, CA 94107  
Dkim3@cca.edu

Abstract  
Driven by the growing importance of digital legacy and thanatosensitive design, my graduate thesis work is focused on exploring new ways to annotate and experience digital imagery through the lens of legacy construction. The made work of this thesis hopes to be a thanatosensitive system of digital image annotation, aiming to embody the passing of time in its aesthetic, inspiring new ways to remember and forget. The timing of the CHI Conference will allow for a completed work, but currently it is in a Research & Development stage.

This paper presents my ongoing development of systems for photo annotation in the digital legacy space (including initial interviews with people introduced to those systems).

Keywords  
Nostalgia, reminiscence, thanatosensitive design, annotation, recipient design, digital imagery, legacy, memory, storytelling, cross-generational collaboration.

ACM Classification Keywords  
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms  
Design, Human factors.
Introduction

The relation between digital and physical is becoming less and less clear. Digital and physical objects are gravitating to a center from their poles; as a growing community of engineers, artists, and designers seek to embed digital properties into physical things and strive to add tactility to digital things. While physical objects can age over time, deeply engaging our senses, digital objects can be easily shared and replicated. My work seeks to take advantage of both digital and physical materials.

While the digital platform houses many different types of our belongings, the focus of this thesis will be on imagery, defined as photos and videos, because digital imagery is generally a large part of many of our personal digital archives, and therefore digital legacy today. Its responsibility to deliver our stories deserves more than the small blocks of text they generally have for annotation.

The remainder of this paper presents ongoing development of a system for annotation, curation and sharing of digital memories that supports feelings of nostalgia and explores questions of digital authenticity. It is a timely exploration as exhibited by Facebook’s recent release of Timeline, which seeks to organize and reframe profile information as a storytelling tool, and Cowbird, a social platform designed by Jonathan Harris, strictly dedicated to storytelling.

Research & Development

To understand how people are dealing with photos and storytelling within a legacy mindset, interviews were held with members of the Baby Boomer generation, who are looking to retire within the next year. The choice to speak with these individuals, Lisa\(^1\), 62, and John, 61, was based on the assumption that legacy construction is a general concern for most people in this age range, much like college admissions can be a concern for young adults in their late teens and early twenties, or marriage can be a concern for single women approaching the age of thirty.

Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to gather pictures of someone who is no longer with us. During the interviews, they were asked to share stories about both the photos themselves and the people within them. The interviews were filled with moving anecdotes, laughter, and even tears. They were insightful and opened a window into the psychology behind the attachment we can have with photos, and how much they mean for those actively thinking about their legacy.

"...This (figure 1) was my mother and my father, as they were. This was the start of us. Dad died two years ago. Mom is still with us, (John pauses to hold back tears.) but not. She has Alzheimer's. I don't think she'd recognize herself today. It would be nice if I could tell this to Bryan (his son) some day. He's... we're busy though."

\(^{1}\) Names have been changed to protect anonymity of participants.
In 2011, Lindley conducted related research focused specifically on behaviors around "recording memories for posterity." Both the research conducted in this thesis thus far, and that of Lindley highlight the current lack of opportunities for older generations to reminisce and share legacy stories with younger ones. Lindley points out the lack of opportunity is not only because daily interactions are scarce, but also because the younger generations' interest levels in the past is generally not present until later in life.

To gain further insight, an interview with John's son, Bryan, 29, was organized. In reference to figure 1, Bryan stated:

"I'm pretty sure those are my grandparents. It's neat seeing them when they were young. Looks like my grandmother was kind of a babe."

It was interesting to hear how different the level of emotion behind the same photo was. While this does naturally happen with stories over time, with the affordances of technology today and the unlimited possibilities for annotation, this sort of gap no longer has to be. Despite the possibilities, a majority of image sharing applications today relies only on text-based annotations and lately geo-location tags. This realization ignited an exploration into possible digital annotations, summarized below.

**Audio Recordings**

Imagine photos were embedded with audio recordings of stories. Such collaborative interactions could enhance multi-generational storytelling opportunities. To test this idea, I played a recording of John's story behind the photo shown in figure 1 to Bryan, after Bryan shared what he knew about it. His quiet expression spoke loudly. He embraced the new level of knowledge he now had about the picture, his father, and his grandmother. However, it is important to note that there is nothing wrong with the lighthearted comments Bryan shared regarding figure 1 earlier; and that his thoughts would never have been shared with such levity if John's story were played immediately. While the emotional impact for Bryan after hearing his father's story was clear, a careful consideration to be made when designing audio annotation is the loss of *projective construction*, which some believe is a significant way in which adults "play." This highlights a design constraint that should be respected to preserve the dynamics behind an organic photo-storytelling experience.

**Handwriting**

Handwriting is another area that was explored in terms of annotation because the formal qualities of handwriting have nostalgic importance. In order to understand this interaction, a quick probe with a Wiimote, infrared LED, and Flash was made, to explore handwriting and see if it could perhaps work its way into our digital experience. The actual page was designed and prototyped with...
unaligned photos of different sizes to create a less structured experience than the perfect grids we have become accustomed to in the digital world. The handwriting was also designed to fade over time to indicate older photos. Respondents liked the idea of photos being different sizes, and enjoyed writing on the screen directly, but preferred typing information so others would be able to read the information more easily later. They were also uncomfortable with the fading. It seemed the nostalgic quality of handwriting on printed photos did not carry over onto the screen for this probe.

Scent & Texture
Inspired by some comments from both Lisa and John’s interviews about smell as a memory trigger, the next experimentation was with scent and texture as photo annotation. The photos were printed in sepia ink as a signifier for the past on soft, natural material (cotton), and scented with perfume. When presented with the probe, Lisa was intrigued, and stated that storing scents in photos or having the ability to “print a scent” was something she felt could enhance her experience. She also liked how she could “feel” the photo.

Relationship to Workshop Goals
As part of exploring design for legacy, my interest in joining the Memento Mori workshop is to open up a discussion of two facets of design for legacy construction:

- Practicing responsible nostalgia; nostalgia that lives within the parameters of thoughtful recall and reminiscence, carefully conscious of its neighbor, obsession.
- Exploring digital authenticity; enhancing the digital’s unique affordances (i.e., sharing, dynamic inputs, and collaboration).

My hope is that this workshop will help us further explore new approaches to digital legacy that hold steadfast to the idea that digital remembering should strive to be as dynamic as the natural process – which has always granted us the ever-important freedom to forget.

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Citations


