

THE HIDDEN HISTORIES OF OBJECTS: PROVENANCE, STORYTELLING AND TAGGING TECHNOLOGIES

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As part of TOTeM, a £1.39M project based around the internet of things, this paper explores linking creative artefacts to stories of their inception, using QR codes.

Introduction

This paper explores storytelling methods to follow the lives of objects from their first inception to the narratives they collect along the way. It is part of TOTeM [1] a £1.39M research project based around the "Internet of Things" [2], which opens up new ways of preserving people's stories through linking objects to the Internet via "tagging" technologies such as QR codes.

The process of appending immaterial data such as textual, video and audio stories, offers a significant additional dimension to the material attributes of an object. Hand produced creative artefacts already transcend a material value because of their individual characteristics and their reference to social and cultural frameworks. As the emerging technology of the Internet of Things supports the tagging of more and more objects, things will begin to accrue an immaterial data shadow that will begin to outweigh its material instantiation (Sterling, 2005).

Project Partners at The University of Dundee and Edinburgh College of Art have been unpacking these notions through creative practices, working both as, and with artists to embed the Internet of Things in a more social and interpersonal context

A rolling stone DOES gather moss

In April 2010, the TOTeM project team launched the web project www.talesofthings.com. The site offered a simple but novel approach to recording social histories and a playful critique of the tagging culture that is associated with the emerging concept known as the 'Internet of Things'. Our platform allows anybody to attach web content (text, image, video and audio) to an artefact through the generation of a unique QR barcode that the owner is encouraged to stick to their thing. When scanned by somebody else using a smart phone, media is launched and the object can be seen/heard to tell a story about the memories that it is associated with.

Our reasoning was simple, that the existing public use of tags (RFID, traditional barcodes and two dimensional) is based upon a 'read only' relationship. And although the web savvy amongst us can generate a QR code and associate it with web-based media, for many people the scanning of codes is a practice reserved for people working on super market checkouts and in passport control booths. As well as offering a place in which unique codes are generated and allow stories to be associated with artefacts,

TalesofThings allows any other beholder the ability to 'add a tale' to someone else's 'thing'. By scanning a tag through the phone App, or by visiting the website, artefacts become 'writeable' and 'open' to further association. This is a critical dimension to the project's politics, that lessons learnt through Web 2.0 should be integral to any Internet of Things.

Following our launch last April the website began accruing stories that were associated with people's actual material artefacts. However as the immaterial database grew it became clear that we needed an event that allowed the material artefacts to become an interface to our internet of things, rather than an online repository of stories. RememberMe at Future Everything offered this context. The RememberMe artwork was a collaborative project with the Oxfam shop charity shop, in Manchester. During Future Everything 2010, a research assistant based in the shop, asked people who dropped things off to tell a brief story about one of the objects into a microphone: where they acquired it, what memories it brings back and any associated stories. These audio clips were then linked to an RFID tag and QR code and attached to the items as they joined the shop's stock. Visitors to the shop, including conference delegates were able to use bespoke RFID readers, or their own smart phone to browse artefacts that were displayed amongst the many thousands of other objects. Labels highlighted the RememberMe objects and once triggered, speakers located in the shop replayed the previous owner's story, evoking a ghost from the past. Once tagged the objects were in the public domain for purchase by other members of the community, and the project's iPhone and Android apps allowed new owners to access old stories but equally importantly, add their own.

This material 'turn' in the life of the project readdressed the balance of where the immaterial data was located. Instead of being accessed through a web interface, the RememberMe work explored the potential of the TalesofThings project to manifest a social Internet of Things that is situated in the event based context of exchange. An exchange of things and stories that contests many of the habitual consumer practices that have formerly defined concepts of value, quality and the destiny of artefacts. A year later we wanted to exploit the project's 'write back' feature and see if we couldn't tip the balance between immaterial and material in favour of the former. During Future Everything 2011 the team developed a follow up project entitled RememberUs. The project consisted of two shops that acted as supernatural portals to the Internet of Things. Visitors to the Oxfam Emporium were invited to 'let go' of memories that are associated with particular things by attaching stories to our memory vessels, moments later in the Oxfam Originals shop just down the street, people were able to 'pick up' memories when they are associated with another 'thing' that they chose to buy. Upon leaving the shop, buyers found that the item that was 'new' to them was associated with a host of old memories, exploding the assumption that a rolling stone gathers no moss.

Artists Stories

When thinking about linking stories to objects, there always has to be a "first story", the one of how a thing came into being. The TOTeM project team is collaborating with creative practitioners to explore some of these first stories to establish platforms for provenance, where storytelling methods are examined for defining and capturing provenance. Looking back at the history of old objects, as well as forward to the possible futures of new objects it is also a means of providing legacies of provenance for future generations.

In tagging art, design & craft objects, the QR code acts as a “digital makers’ mark” with the potential to hold far richer data than traditional marks. Inspiration for the object’s creation and its maker become the key focus, rather than facts about production and manufacturing. Working in a similar way to social networking sites such as Flickr, users of TalesofThings can comment and build upon existing stories with the potential to create a crowd-sourced bank of knowledge about any individual object. This then has the potential to provide future generations with artworks, craft and design objects, which have integrity and a traceable heritage. Whilst the provenance captured by the data shadow of commercial things may be logistical: price, temperature, best before dates etc., information provided by artists and designers has the potential to provide significantly more evocative stories that may change entirely the perception of an object.

In 2005 YBA artist Simon Starling, won the Turner Prize for his work *Shedboatshed*. It appeared to be an ordinary shed and not particularly noteworthy. However, knowing that it was a shed found in rural Switzerland which Starling took apart, made into a boat, floated down the Rhine to the Kunstmuseum in Basel and then reconstructed back into a shed, has made the work, and winning of the Turner prize for it, objects of controversy in both the art world and mainstream media. Paul Shephard, a champion of Starling’s has said of the work: “One of the interesting things about this *Shedboatshed* is that the thing you’re looking at isn’t the whole work. Now this is always true in conceptual art generally because conceptual art uses its artwork to illustrate some other idea. I think what’s interesting about Simon’s work is that he doesn’t deal in concepts so much as actions - so the work is evidence of action having taken place which is slightly different.” (Shephard, 2005)

The idea that a particular action has taken place is pertinent to many objects, but we only know about these actions and the reason for something being identified as an art object if the artist tells us. With tools such as TalesofThings, there is a platform for makers to tell these stories, in an arena that facilitates the conveying and validating of peer reviewable truths. But these can also be subverted, allowing for fictions to be written and for myths arise, both about the objects and their makers. For how do we know that Starling really did float his *Shedboatshed* down the Rhine? The stories woven around creative artefacts also become a reflection of the persona or identities that a maker chooses to construct and portray in the context of their creative practice.

Such myth-making is not new but what is interesting is that by using tagging technologies that allow others to comment on an object’s stories, these myths can be exploited. Take for example, Andy Warhol, around whom myths have evolved. What does artwork made by Andy Warhol actually mean? His screen-prints are iconic, but, in contrast to the Congress of Artists’ definition of what constitutes an original print, Andy Warhol did not make original plates, work the stone, or in his case create even the original screens for his prints, yet he is still recognized as the artist. He did, however, add the “final touches” such as blotting lines to give a less mechanized feel in the final prints. This highlights that even an artist such as Andy Warhol recognized a need for something that resembled the touch of the artist’s hand, even to the point where works were signed. Through in true Warhol style, he was not the one to sign them, his mother was, and when she tired, another artist from The Factory took over. (Buskirk, 2003)

Imagine if those artists working in The Factory were able to tell the stories of the prints they worked on through tagging the artworks, and then allowing others to add to those stories. We can assume that many of those in The Factory were bound by loyalty to Warhol, but it would only take one disenchanted

person to open the floodgates. What would Valerie Solanas done have done with such capabilities in her hands? The myths of Warhol that we are familiar with today could have been very different.

Artist, Claire McVinnie, who like Any Warhol creates artworks using screen-printing, has been profiled in a collaboration with Dundee Contemporary Arts Print as part of a case study examining printmakers using QR codes as digital makers' marks. Over the space of 9 months, Claire has written about her works on TalesofThings, tagged and exhibited them with QR codes and has been filmed telling the tales of her works. Through these activities, the identity as an artist that she wishes to convey is being constructed for an audience who, quite often, may not share the same space and time zone that she does.

Tacitly, Claire is aware that there will be occasions where people will view her telling stories in a space that her works inhabit but that she does not. This is the phenomenon of tele-presence, defined by Lev Manovich as "representational technologies used to enable action, that is, to allow the viewer to manipulate reality through representation...the essence of telepresence is anti-presence" (Manovich, 2001). The art objects become signifiers of Claire's identity as an artist, whilst the digitally mediated content delivered to a users' mobile device can be seen as one way of confirming this in the absence of her actual physical presence. Such a validation can then affect the actions of those at the receiving end, for example the telling of her story may influence the purchase of one of her prints exhibited in a gallery, which may not have otherwise been purchased had the story not been told.

When discussing the filming of Claire's work and stories, she suggested that she be filmed at the print studio where there are screen-printing beds and the tools that she uses to make prints. She also has another studio where she preps her files and works on designs before actually creating the final pieces. The print studio is open-access, often noisy and full of bustle, whilst her own studio is a calm and quiet haven. In communicating her identity as an artist she chose to be filmed in the place where she has a more public image, rather than revealing her personal space on camera. This could be seen as her way of editing what is considered appropriate to convey as a professional artist, whilst remaining protective of a space that could reveal more of a more intimate aspect of her working life. Typical of artists in the print studio, Claire wears an apron, one of the many communal aprons that the artists here share, its stories smudged and smeared across it in a colourful splatter of dried ink. The ink is a testament to the numerous artefacts that the apron has witnessed coming into being and suggests a more experienced artist than if the apron were pristine and unmarked.

Through the use of digital media storytelling methods to construct a rich identity of the artist as a person, the stories can also illustrate the emotional investment of the maker in that creative artefact. In her screen-print of New York, Claire tells of how she went on a college trip there in 1995 and took photos from the Empire State Building, but was so disillusioned with the foggy weather she didn't bother to get them processed. Years later she found the film and did eventually process them, realizing that with photoshop she could claim back parts of the image that she had lost to the mist and rain. She also admits that "This is one of the first screen-prints I even did, so I was still just learning". It was also the first artwork that she chose to talk about when being filmed, which considering the strength of the image and the success she has had in selling it, suggests that the work is seminal in her journey as a professional artist.

During the study of artists working at Dundee Contemporary Arts, the integrity of the artist as a print-maker is articulated through many of their stories and is poignant in Annis Fitzhugh's text-based entry on TalesofThings accompanied with an image of her work *Cancellation Proof*: "when a limited edition is completed, the plate or block is defaced, often with a cross, so that no more prints may be made from it. The plants represented are all on the Red List of endangered species." (Fitzhugh, 2010)

This entry implies that the edition is "authentic" because Annis created a cancellation print for her edition, a "proof" that the edition is limited. The content of the artwork, like the print itself, is endangered, rare and limited. Annis' entry also explains printmaking processes to non-printmakers and the comment following up on this by a user called "froggo" shows a discourse beginning to emerge about the work, and about printmaking practices, when they write: "That's sad that a lot of nice images get defaced in such a way :)" (ibid) One can infer that froggo is not a printmaker, but that they appreciate the print that was cancelled. This comment is also thought-provoking in how accepted norms and "good practices" in printmaking can be perceived as destructive by those outside the field, who are unaware of the critical debates surrounding authenticity and originality of the print.

By examining artefacts and the stories that creative practitioners use to express how their objects came into being, the frameworks in which they are viewed enables a privileged insight into maker's creative processes, experiences and emotional states. Through tagging technologies, this "mobile augmentation" of art and design objects, where the physical has digital and therefore multiple presences, Walter Benjamin's notion of "aura" comes into play, "One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced." (Benjamin, 1934). In her study of Le Courbusier's archived drawings at the Le Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris, Susan Yee of MIT describes her experiences as she handles his largest drawings: "All I could think about was that this was Le Courbusier's original drawing. It was meticulously hand-drawn, but the drawing was dirty. There were marks on it, smudges, fingerprints, the marks of other hands, and now I added mine. I felt close to Le Courbusier..." (Lee, 2007). On her last day in Paris she discovers that all the drawings have been collated in a digital database and she mourns that "the scans for the website gave me nothing to touch" (ibid).

Benjamin's concepts come from experiencing the "original" work first hand, being able to see the marks that the artist has made in their exploration of the medium in which the work is created. The same applies for any object and the memories, bumps and scratches that it collects on its journey. Although the Internet of Things, and mobile tagging technologies demand a need for the digitisation of artefacts, one could argue that when an object is tagged with the previous owner's memories or a creative artefact is tagged and augmented with the artist's voice, the "aura" has the potential to be heightened and enhanced rather than lost.

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1. *Tales of Things and Electronic Memories - Edinburgh College of Art, Brunel University, University of Dundee, University College London (UCL), University of Salford*
2. *This is tagging technologies to track physical objects in the real world. Eg: Oyster Cards in the London Underground.*