V. The Idea

oublié/trouvé *• a short explanation of the system •* ***design objects*** *• icon sets • storyboards i • reading response film • classifications • system overview • characters • storyboards ii •* ***pitfalls and objections*** *• expanding the empathy circle too far • nostalgia as a waste of our new capabilities • dangers of completionism • perilous duration*

Oublié/trouvé

And so the goal became: create a real, private, reflexive, transportable thing-that-one-can-think-with, and do so in a way one can fabricate alone, given a consumer-level fabrication lab. Embed this investable object in a system where it can become a container or interface for memory. The memory should consist of inflected moments ripe for stereoscopic juxtaposition. Make use of the computing options we have, but let it feel a little different from eternal screens. Let it be something we can have a relationship with. Let it be something personal; something *I* can have relationship with.

Oublié/trouvé is a hardware and software system for ingesting and juxtaposing memories. In its final form, it makes use of a BLE-enabled organic object to communicate with an iPhone app. In addition to being an interface, the object is a talisman and worry stone. The app collects and organizes saved moments, offering different groupings for review at any time. It also seeks moments that match the grouping conditions and

notifies its owner (or human partner) via the object when these conditions are present.

In her paper on phenomenology, Martha Ladly discusses the "embodied experience of 'Savouring' and 'Fulfilling'" in Heidegger:

> Heidegger devised the idea of *formal notification* in communication, as a demand that the other person (the one with whom we are communicating), when shown a thing, must look at it themselves. They must see for themselves what is *notified* (or shown) in order to *fulfill* that thing, with their own experience of it. With fulfillment comes the opportunity to *savour* the thing. We can only do this if we are present, and in the flow of temporal experience. (145)

Combining some conventions of data visualization with obscured data, Oublié/trouvé wants to make it possible for its human partner to experience the notification-fulfillment-savoring phenomenon and in so doing re-encounter herself. Oublié/trouvé should also provide a way to investigate a more contextual sense of information, something that rubs against the abstracted, riven concept with which we are usually presented.

This section reviews the initial design documents involved in the genesis of the system and a few objections to the project.

Design Objects

Icon Sets

[[insert icon images from 2.2a, b, and c :as 5.1, 5.2, 5.3]]

In an early phase of the work, I investigated three related themes that were present in my desire to push back against watcher objects and contextual information. These were: design for techno-human symbiosis, the nature of humanized objects, and sense-induced experience. In each case, I read a few articles, watched some talks, and explored related events in each field. I also curated a set of icons from a larger, purchased set, and it was this activity that helped me locate my context, goals, and ideas.

Figure 5.1, the icon set for *design for techno-human symbiosis* already makes visible the assumption that this comprises a melding of art and chips, and perhaps a royal user. I also managed to choose three different memory technologies without realizing: a chip, a floppy, and a server. This may point to the icons available in a set for web development but also highlights how much memory is in fact at the core of computing.

Figure 5.2, created for *the nature of humanized objects* focuses on messages and representations of the physical world, which is to say, the other important elements in computing. For good measure I also included some burning cash: what would we make if we weren't concerned with profit?

Sense-induced experience, shown in 5.3, is concerned with mystery and intimation. The figure is no longer a king nor a detective but is instead barely there: he is his trappings, his metadata, a costume. Experience is like a flag on a buoy, crystals, or a basic collection of shapes. It is distilled and harsh. The outside world here is seen as desert, instead of the mountain representations from *the nature of humanized objects*. These icons seek intensity.

Storyboards I

The icon sets then formed the ground for my first collection of storyboards, shown in Figures 5.4 and 5.5.

These already show two currents at work in this project: a sense of history and a sense of future history — or projecting ourselves through time. They also include a sense of unease with today; the presumption that all is not right.

The second iteration moved from situating the idea in history to considering a sense of experience, which is the same trajectory the explorations took. I was clear on why I wanted to investigate this space and the largest problem I was attempting to solve. (Though this has morphed through research into doubt about the problem-solving uses of design and interest in the option-exploring uses, at this point I had yet to question this basic design assumption.)

The next step was to explore ways to express memory experience.

Reading Response Film & Classifications

In response to an assignment asking us to create an artistic reflection on our reading, I chose to focus on the sense-memory experience of the works. To do so, I created a watercolor illustration (see Figure XXX) of a scent-palette for scents I recalled while reading. (The full film is available on the project site.) These include direct scents, like fixative, the smell of photography, or ozone, the smell of some computers; they represented are more abstract scents: your parent's house at night (see Figures XXX–XXX

for annotated stills). I then drew in the webs of connections between each, as they exist in the world and in my mind.

While if I were to remake the film as a film experience I would slow it down and allow more time to concentrate on each scent indicator, I took great pleasure in playing with memory webs and exploring moments backwards and forwards. Would it be possible to focus on a meditative moment encounter?

To think through this a little more, I created a series of classifications cards to illustrate possible ways to consider moments. (see Figures XXX–XXX) Drawing these out instead of making them in Sketch gave me the chance to think about each a little longer, and I went from notes to thumbnail to watercolor. Altogether, these four cards illustrate the breadth of information qualities and mark-making approaches the project might take. In fact, nearly all the ideas in “Ways to Make a Mark” found their way into materials testing for the object.

The simplest ideas from “Ways to Describe a Place” — distance and elevation — made it into the current prototype. Volume of people and volume of water are on the list for the next iteration. The former develops greater resonance when we call from the previous section that one of the key requirements for a *moment bienhereux* in Proust is that the narrator be alone or seeking solitude.

Finally, while it focuses on the two most dispersed densities of feeling, the project allows for at least three methods of bridging ambiguity — *projection*, *imagination*, and *interpolation* —, while repudiating *specification* and *rejection* as tools of unmoored information.

System Overview & Character Questions

It was time to get more specific, which in this case meant sketching the system (Figure XXX) and asking specific questions about each of the three nodes: the object, the application, and the user.

If we consider the system of culture and communication shown in Figure 2.XX, this work focuses on the two rightmost spheres: the physical world and the sphere of communication.

I described it in the initial blog post:

> The system comprises five stages, which take place both in the physical world and in the minds of two types of observers: the user-creator-operator (or user for short) and external observers, who may or may share a temporal space with the user.
>
> The object will be instantiated in the **creation phase**. Here we must determine the desirability of the object's being fabricated entirely by the user with reference only to set a plans, from a kit that includes hard-to-fabricate objects, or being made most-accessible but least-special by being manufactured. Another path to consider is the modification of extant objects.
>
> Once created, the object becomes a part of the **investment-playback-reflection loop**. The interaction is the core of my action to pollute the possible by exposing an interaction that is digital but not context-less. An application and the object will

> be able to play off one another in order to create a reflexive experience: characterized by intersection, layering, juxtaposition and possibly even surprise. The capabilities and functionalities required to enable this experience — and to keep it from being a job in itself — must be investigated and refined, and this action will be the task of the thesis.
>
> Finally, the system must consider the question of **memorialization**. The action of freezing and elaboration seems necessary for a complete work of memory and for the social function of talismans. However, it may be a bit of a stretch for this work to fully approach. There is a lot of uncertainty here. (Groff Hennigh-Palermo, thesis blog, spring section, "009: System 1: Overview & Aspect 2: Materials")

Here I still use standard design terms, like user, even if I make a gesture towards expanding it in "user-creator-operator." It is only now, having investigated the history of information theory and polluting the possible via critical design that using design terms feels discordant to the project goals. The *user* carries implications of a system determining possible interactions and goals, rather than being a malleable tool or location of continued encounter. Perhaps rather than the *user*, we should design for the *investigator*, the *explorer*, the *human partner*?

The *investment-playback-reflection* loop forms the heart of the diagram and stayed intact throughout the process. Testing has shown that finding the balance between feeling as though one is working *for* the machine versus *with* the machine remains elusive quarry. How to do so might be the hardest question of the entire project.

The general system summary made it possible to begin to ask questions about the three constituents, as shown in Figure XXX. This led directly to materials testing, which is covered in §7, and to the final design system documents: a second set of storyboards.

Storyboards II

These storyboards (Figure XXX) are more specific than the first round. They use some elements of the original icon set, and many additions, to outline the interaction that has been brought to life in the prototype. The human experiences a moment of inflection and saves it. Moments are made available both through notification and to curiosity at any time. In retrospect, while the lighthouse has made it into the visual design of the application, the flag on the buoy is perhaps a better representation of the moments saved. They surface and we mark them; then off they bob.

Pitfalls and Objections

Now that the impetus and justification for the system have been indicated; the reasons for a physical object and memory as content bullet-pointed and described; the workings of the system sketched, it is worth taking a moment to consider the pitfalls and objects that meet all projects of ambition.

Jaron Lanier, for instance, might argue that creating an object we hope to have a relationship with, one that can contain “the residue of the uniquely human” (Hayles 67) would be expanding the “empathy circle” too far, undermining that which is special about humanity. (Lanier 40) He might also argue that the nostalgic — and when we talk about using memory we must be clear we are talking explicitly about captured and induced

nostalgia — is fundamentally non-authentic and a "waste" of our new technological capabilities. (Lanier 130)

Fortunately, this argument offers little more than modernism-fueled novelty worship. That is, it is based on the unthinking assimilation of the 20th century cult of the avant-garde, where authenticity is an uncomplicated value and novelty-in-production is the only verification of novelty-in-experience. These assumptions have been summarily dismantled in a large number of postmodern works that need not be outlined here. I hope, too, the array of memory-inspired artworks available to us will reveal that modes of the past can be a rich medium through which to explore the present.

Sherry Turkle brings up a more complex pitfall in the preface to *The Inner History of Devices*. She tells of Gordon Bell, computer pioneer (this is beginning to sound familiar) and creator of MyLifeBits. Working with a team from Microsoft, Bell is animated by the "idea of a complete, digitally accessible life." This means scanning all of his books, recording all of his lectures, capturing everything from notes to logos in pursuit of a total archive for their descendants. (Turkle, *Devices* 24) Here again is Pierre Nora's nightmare.

Turkle contrasts this approach with two others. The first is Lillian Hellman's approach in which meaning "comes in *pentimento*, in the painter's layering of paint, in his 'repentance' as he finds what he wants in the process of repainting." Of this she asks, "What will become of this kind of reworking, when, in digital culture, people's fantasies shift from telling the story of a life to having a complete record of it?"

The second approach is taken by Turkle's own mother: saving photographs with poems on the back in a large drawer, pulling them out to savor again, sometimes in joy, sometimes in mourning. Turkle fears this approach will be corroded by the digital:

> Of course, the digital archive is only a resource; it remains for us to take its materials as the basis for a deeply felt enterprise of recollection. But one wonders if the mere fact of the archive will not make us feel that the job is already done. (Turkle, *Devices* 24, 26–27)

In both circumstances the idea is that the totalization of digital memory, its inhuman perfection, will drive out reflection, curation, accretionism. And that this is immanent in technology itself.

In response to this, I want to push back on the idea that there is an unchangeable digital *character* as opposed to a contingent digital deployment. Performance artist Susan Kozel, in her reflections on her piece *Telematic Dreaming*, argues similarly:

> My "performance" in Telematic Dreaming (which felt more like a dwelling) took place in 1994. This piece is significant for revealing, in an accessible way, that basic human qualities such as touch, trust, vulnerability, pain, and embodiment are not lost when people engage with each other through technologies: we just need an appropriate methodological framework in order to see and validate this. (Kozel 88)

In the performance, Kozel was in a separate room from her digital self, which was projected on a bed in a gallery. Over the course of her

residency, she was able to have a range of improvised interactions with visitors, many intimate and surprising. She reports physically feeling certain interactions, despite the fact that visitors were only touch her projection. This is itself "an indication of the strong physicality of the piece, of the powerful link between the body on the screen and the bundle of emotions, thoughts, and movement that make up my material body." (Kozel 94)

She then explicitly pushes away the idea that digital works *must* be a certain way.

> The mechanization or computerization of human experience is generally thought to diminish the physical and emotional sides of life, yet in the virtual world of Telematic Dreaming questions of privacy, intimacy, and identity were central. This was not just my experience as a performer: many members of the public were overwhelmed by their experiences on the other bed. Some felt protective toward me, or stayed on the bed because they didn't want me to be alone in my virtual world. Others claimed to have been "changed" by the experience. The installation was paradoxical not only for using technology to provide a forum for experiencing the basics of human intimacy, but also for situating this private interaction within a public domain. (Kozel 95)

That is, the experience of technology and space can be different than the norm if it is part of a different undertaking. Supporting imperfect, incomplete, and partial approaches is worthwhile challenge for Oublié/trouvé. Can it be made to allow for small, pleasant engagements, for augmentations and returns?

The final pitfall for this project is its duration. The vector for change, via polluting the possible, takes a long time. Testing memory-based interactions is challenging. Previous material culture history examples address the first issue and in the next section, we will look at alternate testing methods in order to address the second.