

VIIb. Looking Outside: Similar Works and a Website for the Object

*related works • mylifebits • reporter • moodnotes • memory device •
dear data • datacatcher • a website for the object • reflections on
the role of the designer*

Related Works

In creating Oublié/trouvé, I encountered and reviewed a number of related projects. I looked at other memory collection systems, like MyLifeBits, Reporter, Moodnotes, and Memory Device, as well as at alternative approaches in Memory Device, Datacatcher, and Dear Data.

MyLifeBits

MyLifeBits is one of the earliest totalizing life-data projects. Turkle introduces the project and its creator, “computer pioneer” Gordon Bell in the preface to *The Inner History of Devices*. 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. (*Devices* 24) The project expanded to location tracking via GPS and a light-activated camera that would take a snap on a timer or when a new person came into the frame. (Gemmel 2)

The project is unsurprisingly predicated on the notion that it is human memory that is fallible and the all-remembering computer that is the preferable option. The project is introduced in *Scientific American*:

Human memory can be maddeningly elusive. We stumble upon its limitations every day, when we forget a friend's telephone number, the name of a business contact or the title of a favorite book. People have developed a variety of strategies for combating forgetfulness — messages scribbled on Post-it notes, for example, or electronic address books carried in handheld devices—but important information continues to slip through the cracks. Recently, however, our team at Microsoft Research has begun a quest to digitally chronicle every aspect of a person's life, starting with one of our own lives (Bell's). (Bell 58)

The rest of the article is full of the totalizing promises that underlay watcher objects: prediction, vast archives for future historians, and the ability to remember exactly what color shirt we wore fifteen years ago. The project explicitly positions itself as the logical culmination of computing trends. This is the life Oublié/trouvé prefers to counter.

Reporter

Nicholas Felton's Reporter app is similar to MyLifeBits in that it looks to collect details multiple times each day. Created in 2014, about fifteen years after MyLifeBits, Reporter is able to take advantage of the integrated sensors in phones in a way Bell could only anticipate. Unlike MyLifeBits, Reporter was created to collect data that would be reported and sorted manually.

Felton is known for his personal annual reports — beautiful folios that visualize personal data from the previous year. An early version of Reporter was created as a tool for Felton to use in the creation of his 2012 report. A refined version was then released to the public. At random moments throughout the day, the app alerts you it has a survey ready and prompts you to answer a set of questions about what you are doing, where you are, who you are with. It comes with preset questions and users are able to add their own.

I was a huge fan of Felton's work and was very excited to download the app when it first came out. And then I hated it.

From seeing Felton's reports, I thought knowing the same information about myself would be fascinating and enlightening. But it turns out I dislike a phone interrupting me and asking me questions constantly — even if constantly is only a few times each day. I often forgot to tell the app I was awake, and I never wanted to put in the effort to structure my data, despite the app offering different question types to facilitate this work. I was never able to discover if the information was interesting in the aggregate; the interruption and up-front effort was too much.

Moodnotes

Like MyLifeBits, Moodnotes is built around the watching object proposition: it will watch us and it will help us be better. Though the premise here is less appealing than the insight promise of Reporter, Moodnotes seems to have solved the data structuring issue by presenting users with mostly structured questions and some convenient ambiguity.

For the primary question — “How are you feeling?” — Moodnotes presents a clever slider along with the request that users enter a general feeling. (See Figure XXX) The ambiguity in the input, avoiding words and instead relying on a basic face and color, allows users to engage the the application and their feeling simultaneously, without worrying about a mismatch in terms. Users can also enter a text description and more refined emotions from a list.

Like Reporter, Moodnotes also includes screens visualizes entered data, so users can review and seek insight. Both apps, like Oublié/trouvé only store data on the user’s phone.

Memory Device

The three foregoing apps each engage memory and journaling from the traditional machine-oriented point of view: the app works to augment our fallible minds; the pure mind of the machine is available to able to make explicit the trends we may miss. Ishaac Bertran’s Memory Device is a true deviant.

The device comprises a small display with a single button. (See Figure XXX) On the project site, Bertan explains its descent, writing,

We rely on technology to collect and make sense of our own data, but very often technology doesn’t give us the right to filter what we want to remember, or what we want to forget.

The Memory device reminisces back to a time when people used to tie a string around their fingers, or pin a piece of paper on their clothes, to help them remember something.

In this case, when the user presses the button, a line is added to the screen. Previous days may be accessed by turning the knob, but no other information is available. The device also honors forgetting in a gesture against the totalizing conception of memory we see in the previous three projects. This also means, however, that it targets a different sort of memory that Oublié/trouvé — what Shattuck would recognize as the cinematic. Like Reporter, it accumulates small changes, even though it visualizes these differently.

Using a single line to represent a moment, Memory Device shows how expressive even the barest of marks can be.

Dear Data

Expressive mark-making is also the salient feature of the Dear Data project from Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec. Both women have a long history of making aesthetically expressive data visualization pieces outside standard charting approaches. (In fact, both create data visualizations without coding. They literally stand slightly removed from computer-defined information.)

Posavec's *First Chapters*, which charts sentence length in first chapters of classic books by generating a line whose density varies based on sentence length, was one of the first forms of alternate visualization I ever encountered and, as such, is one of the first cells in this project's genesis. Lupi's work with Accurat, particularly visualizations of painters' and writers' lives, is the second.

Recently, the two collaborated on a project, Dear Data, in which they created personal visualization postcards and sent them to one another.

The project has blown up, resulting in a book, a program to match personal-data penpals, contests, and even Dear Data–related museum activities at MoMA.

The project itself presents a number of strong options for visualization using shape and color encoding and evidence for the value of aesthetic data communication. Even more, the appetite for the project and the public's interest in manually collecting data as a source for art suggests a project like Oublié/trouvé will have resonance.

Datacatcher

Datacatcher, a project from Gaver and the other researchers at Goldsmiths, echoes the push-and-twist interface of Memory Device and the location-awareness of Oublié/trouvé. Unlike both of these projects, however, Datacatcher is concerned with public, social data.

The handheld machine presents users with a variety of facts about the neighborhood they are in. These facts are drawn from official sources, social media, and reflections from users that are fed into the system again. The presentation of facts centers more on comparative facts that cold statistics, seeking to capture a texture of the location.

In interviews, users reported enjoying dipping in and out of the system as they went about their days. Some were skeptical of the purpose of a specific device over a phone app and many remarked on the size, wishing for something easier to carry. In the end, though, the strangeness of the object seemed to engage people further. (Boucher 133–48) Altogether the Datacatcher, like Dear Data, gives evidence of the appeal of specific data,

even if is more location-related than personal. It also presents further evidence that users will engage with a non-phone object regularly.

A Website for the Object

Related projects provided anecdotal evidence for the cultural resonance of projects similar to Oublié/trouvé. However, when explaining the application to my cohort and other interested parties, it was not always clear that the system as a whole made sense — and it was challenging to describe the system and its goals succinctly.

To address these concerns, and to investigate resonances of the app absent the reflections that this paper provides, I created a faux-marketing page at lost-time.club. The page plays off standard startup marketing tropes to explain Oublié/trouvé. I then set up a short survey which I posted to Twitter and Slack, as I did with the Lovable Objects survey detailed in §3. I received 19 responses, which are reproduced in the appendix.

Other than one respondent who found the exercise boring and thus stopped reading the site partway through (but still decided to complete the survey!), most readers did understand the system to a large degree; some even had cleverer descriptions than I came up with, like “Quasiquantified self-reflection” and “NaaS (nostalgia as a service).” I attribute the clarity to the system illustration primarily (Figure XXX).

The system appears to be a decent gambit for polluting the possible through use. Only 16% of respondents were definitively uninterested in having the system in their own lives; the rest split equally between *yes* and *not sure*. Some were interested in the object as an art piece; others as

a tool. One response made it clear that the satire of the site had been read into the piece as a whole.

In terms of polluting the possible through inspiring others to create their own idiosyncratic tools, the project also appears to be a success, with 21% giving a strong *yes* to the question “Does this make you want to invent your own kind of object?” and another 30% saying *maybe*.

Reflections on the Role of the Designer

If knowledge is built phenomenologically, in the role of tester and researcher, it is still easiest to disseminate as designer. Having been an interaction designer professionally for a number of years, this role was the most familiar and the tools were within reach.

At first I wanted to avoid traditional design documents, seeing them as tools of the product design system the invested object is meant to work against. Besides, if I was both manufacturer and designer, did I need illustrations? I only had myself to communicate with. In fact, being able to communicate the goal of the object before years of memory were embedded in it was important. Pollution is a long-term project and design documents are useful.

Comparing the project to critical design also made it clear that what needed to be changed in order to make a wider future available through design work is not form but the status of authority. As we saw in §2, critical design begins its work with the forecasts of experts, who are by their nature committed to current plausible futures — and often their authors.

In the introduction to *Writing Material Culture History*, Gerritsen and Riello relate the rise of material culture history is to the democratization of history as field and the subsequent focus on everyday lives. (Gerritsen and Riello 3–5)

Using design tools to spread idiosyncratic projects — as long as we avoid appeal to authority — does make it feel like an effective route to polluting the possible with our own, small-people ideas. It also provides the written materials some material culture scholars, like Styles, look for.