VIII. Reflections

life with oublié/trouvé • ***through other lenses*** • *phenomenologies and alternate research methods • material culture • characteristics of an invested object • "digital character"* • ***future plans***

Life with Oublié/trouvé

I have reflected so far on each role except the most important — using Oublié/trouvé as the human portion of the symbiotic system. For this test, I carried a version of the object and app with me, beginning October 17 and extending through today. The app was pre-seeded with memories collected via paper testing and reminiscence. (These are reproduced in the appendix.) Visualizations were not added to the test until November 1. Concordances were changed from simple, single-dimension lists to complex groupings at the same time.

Although I was excited to test my system, the first few days were difficult. I was afraid to break the object and the bright LED drew attention to the electronics. (I didn't want to turn it off because it was how I knew the object was connected to the application and the battery was charged.) The battery was constantly running out. Then, in a process of acclimation similar to moving in with someone for the first time, the moments of finickiness turned into opportunities for care. I became less afraid to hurt the object. A light in the early morning quiet was a sign the system was working, an external part of my memory humming next to my coffee cup.

Concordance notifications varied with concordance complexity. I only received one after the more complex checks were introduced; it was much anticipated and much appreciated, although in that case it was more of a distraction than moment for reflection. Overall, I received notifications in convenient and inconvenient moments. As I might have anticipated after my experiences with Reporter, there were times I was annoyed to be interrupted; these were mostly when I was working. In a broader test, this would be less of a problem because I would not be spending most of my days working on the object or system that was also notifying me. There were also times I was happy and receptive but was unable to engage because other people were around. (Just like Proust's poor narrator. It appears the system successfully targeted *moments bienhereux*.)

The effect of a notification could continue long beyond the moment of engagement, too. The best receptive moment, in fact, started badly — on my least favorite kind of gray, swampy day. I can be a bit of a plant, and days without sunshine are trials to be survived; worse, I don't even find the rain nourishing. So when the object buzzed and I saw the *Humidity: Swamp* concordance had triggered it I was not happy. This was why I needed to get onto those complex groupings, dammit! I have zero nostalgic memories of rain! I grew up in Southern California under a drought! What a stupid mistake.

But then, an hour or so later, the irritation mellowed slightly, the right song came on my headphones at the right train stop and it all came back. It worked. There *were* gray days that had this flavor, this depressed thoughtfulness. And how many times on those days had I listened to the Psychedelic Furs? I loved the graveyard here at the Wilson L train stop in the sunlight, but also again, vague in the soft rain. Views stacked up; juxtapositions. I can recall the freezing publishing office *cum* bookstore I

worked in when was 22 and consider how much and how little I am that same narrator. I don't know that I can point to a recognition that became clear here, but I am still much younger that Proust's narrator is when he attends his final, ultimate illusion-piercing party, so I have hope.

As for moment saving — I have hope, too. I did not collect every moment and I did not annotate many. Towards the end of the test, though, I did forget the object and regret bitterly being unable to add a moment. I was on the go, I did not have pockets, I had that inflected feeling and I was consumed with regret. It was working. But it was not consuming. I willfully let a moment pass when noting it would be disturbing. I did not become a monster.

My interaction with the system settled into a frequency befitting a project of long duration. The object is usually nearby and mostly comes out with me, but notifications are no longer daily. While this is not ideal for a month-long test, it was ideal for enjoyment.

Often when thinking, I played with the object. A few times, I opened the app to peruse the moments and concordance lists, but this has been the least explored aspect in day-to-day use. As I document the piece, though, I have come to enjoy looking at the individual moment expressions; their images that are just different enough to be interesting. I return to sets of moments far more often than I ever checked the graphs in Reporter. My goal isn't to decode them even though doing so would be trivial; instead I enjoy seeing them together as variations on an impossible core experience that is itself inaccessible except through slight glimpses. It is a different, interesting approach to information, and I am slowly building a meaning with them.

Overall, then, the experiment has been successful, if too short. I was able to form a friendship with my object and a rapport with moments and their context. Many of the scenarios I generated to test around occurred — particularly wanting to save moments both with and without having the object and sometimes being annoyed at the buzz. (See Appendix for scenario list.) Others, particularly around widely disparate moments, have yet to occur.

Through Other Lenses

Though the truth of my own experience was the primary goal of this research project, it is also worth investigating how the system fares when viewed through other lenses introduced in this paper: phenomenologies, material culture, system diagram, the characteristics of an invested object, the character of memory, and Turkle's "digital character."

Phenomenologies and Alternate Research Methods

The project hewed closely to the phenomenological methods outlined in §6. The reflections in this section follow the more straightforward style Kozel models in her *Telematic Dreaming* phenomenology, as do the reflections on other roles — manufacturer, developer, designer. Taken together, they are the work in the style of Sicchio's immanent researcher, examining the personal changes experienced when a single researcher lives each role. The reflections were produced using the three-step process described in Ladly: field notes as *capta*, this paper as the reflected experience and pursuit of meaning-making.

The self-interviews, imaginative goal setting and marketing site satire expanded the project into some of the more creative document types

suggested both in Kozel and Ellis.

In §6, we note Sullivan's assertion that "an exegesis is not merely a form of documentation that serves preliminary purposes, that records in-process activity, or displays outcomes: *it is all of these*." (*Art As Research*, 221, emphasis original) Altogether, this paper and related writings; the Oublié/trouvé system; and the process blog make up a project in the thesis-exegesis style.

It is therefore not surprising to see this project engaging in all four types of reflexiveness Sullivan identified as characteristic of practice-as-research works: the self-reflexive is present in the reflections; future plans outlined below represent both a meta-analytic response to empirical surveys and a response to problems unearthed within this research; and the paper and its defense are themselves an engagement with the dialogic academic practice.

Finally, based on the feedback to the marketing site outline in §7, particularly the 21% of respondents who said the project description made them want to make something, the project can be considered moderately successful in meeting the phenomenological goal of resonance or vibration within the community.

Material Culture

The Oublié/trouvé research project therefore lives up to the goals set for it in §6. But what might the object communicate to future material culture historians? In "Material Culture and the History of Artefacts," Viccy Coltman presents a series of questions that can be asked of a work of art or other artefact to "pierce the mute carapace of objecthood to let the

work speak." (Jules Prown, quoted in Coltman 20) These include questions about the object itself, its production and consumption, and its afterlife. (See Figure XXX)

Answering these questions, we can sketch what a material culture historian might see:

The object is made of plaster and electronics. It is either broken or incomplete, as it has a button and motor but does these are not attached to one another. It is reasonably small and light. It appears to be handmade, and may be unique. This is perhaps the most distinguishing aspect of the object, as it can be dated to the time of ubiquitous small electronics mass-production. It was mobile and carried a lot, as we can see from the wear. The owner did not take special care of it.

Other questions are unanswerable, still. If the software is no longer available, which is plausible, given issues with conserving computer art already, future historians are unlikely to be able to understand what it was for.

The object's intimacy may remain the most durable meaning possible to take from the artifact. It also can communicate the desire to make electronics belong to us; the personal in personal computing is usually the expression produced with an impersonal machine, but in this case the personal is in the development of the machine itself. Perhaps if the theory behind the work is lost with this exegesis, the raw desire to make the impersonal personal will be communicated to the future.

Characteristics of an Invested Object

Back here, with the exegesis at hand, we can consider Oublié/trouvé in terms of the goals set out in §3 (see Figure XXX). Overall, the object succeeds at being an invested object.

The object portion of the Oublié/trouvé system is a real thing: it is physical; the surface decoration communicates its use as a tactile object and the material takes on a patina over time. Each scratch makes each iteration unique. The durability of the plaster and the internal electronics is able to communicate its use. (See the various test objects in Figure XXX.)

It is a thing I can think with, and have thought with. The object has worked as worry stone and become the repository for my feelings about the project. In accordance with the interpretations in the SEI study, the asymmetric, blobby top shape is calming while reflecting some of the incomplete thoughts that may bring it out.

Practically, the object is transportable. It is small — pocket-sized. It has magnets embedded to allow it to be attached to bags for users — mostly women — who often do not have pockets. It is also something that users can make themselves. Manufacturing requires desktop machines that are available in community fabrication labs.

The system is private: the structure is open and the surface is malleable. The data visualization is personal and nontransparent, though the color and arrangement were chosen to echo the emotions I associate with dimensions of metadata. For instance, in general the more preferred intensity (clear days, warm temperatures) results in a bolder pattern. Because data lives on the phone, it cannot be communicated to others

without permission; the unstructured irreducibility of text also keeps meaning private and away from the surface.

As we've noted previously, the system expresses its reflexivity by allowing the user to chart and investigate a topology of personal time. It also attempts to maintain context for information through the metadata is saves with each moment. We do not try to avoid feedback or neuroticism, or conserve stasis in the system. Over time it can amplify repeated metadata and the related patterns will become characteristic of the app's aesthetic.

In this way, the project reaches strongly towards being a different sort of information experience.

Digital Character / Object as Work

This is where we run into the most difficult interactional hurdle. Turkle expressed this in terms of digital character — the idea that the possibility for completeness in a digital archive would drive completionism in users, overwhelming slower methods of meaning making. Likewise, it was possible that automated memory-gathering gives us the impression that we do not need to think through recollection, to build up meaning bit-by-bit. This project attempted to create a digital archive where this was not the case, but instead was more like browsing through a drawer of photos.

This is provided for by, on the one hand, creating supports for annotations and browsing and, on the other, by divorcing concordance notifications from direct linkages and over-completeness. Because saving a moment requires direct action and is not a background process, the human is prevented from the sense that the machine can do everything.

At times during testing, the project did feel like work, particularly at the beginning. Once I reminded myself that I was engaging in a longer term endeavor, beyond this report, the worry dispersed. Engaging with the app as a self-practice and focal point of reflection was engaging without being overwhelming, and but for being part of an academic work with a deadline, it felt like a recreation.

While imperfect, the project was, in the end, a digital work with the characteristics of a more analog set of remembrances, and as such, a success.

Future Plans

In what may be the final evidence of success, there are a number of routes that might be taken to further the project and better investigate the questions it has raised.

Making it possible for the battery to be charged inductively and creating custom PCBs for the object hardware that integrates the microcontroller and components into a single round board would make it possible to put together a home-manufacturing kit. This kit could be used as the basis of wider tests and research similar to the Goldmith's Datacatcher trials. While I maintain the truth value of phenomenological research, wider tests would be a vector to spread the idea further.

Within the application itself, I would like to continue to work on data collection and visualization. Most practically, getting vector patterns working would allow me to test and create finer and more complex visualizations. Implementing different interactions to provide for easier visualization browsing would also boost the visualization experience. I

would like to add in other types of metadata mentioned in the classifications exploration such as the volumes of people and water associated with a moment; I would also like to explore other methods of giving a sense of location, such as building height and green space.

I considered keyword search within memories when I first designed the app, and it can be seen in the initial design images. Originally, I included it on the list of features to add, but after considering the experience of privacy inherent in irreducible text, I do not believe it would be a beneficial addition. Rather, the ability to forget, to hide and retrieve moments would further complicate the information available in the app and allow for a different, possibly more challenging experience.

Finally, while the project engaged with nearly the entire system diagrammed in Figure 5XXX, the last phase, memorialization went unaddressed. This is part of the reason it was hard to project how the work might be interpreted by future historians, but it also limits the project's experience today to owning it oneself. Memorialization could focus on self-expression and support for sharing various concordances or topologies; it could also focus on disposal for the object once it is retired. For instance, moment images could be etched into metal and buried along with a broken object as a personal time-capsule.

We can do so much more to unravel and re-situate information. I look forward to it.