

Technology Heirlooms

The Technology Heirlooms project was a speculative research effort produced by the Socio-Digital Systems group at Microsoft Research in Cambridge, UK. We're a multi-disciplinary team of social-scientists, designers and engineers.

With this project we were interested in exploring two slightly uncomfortable areas of digital design:

Longevity: What is the value of all our digital content (virtual or physical) in the long term?

Legacy: What happens to all our digital content when we die?

Our goal with this work was the production of insights to help inform the product development directions and decisions within Microsoft.

Design artefacts were produced as part of this process in order to encourage discussion with our research participants. Three of these are presented here.

Background: Backup Box. One of our three artefacts.

Research

Sentiment

We know that people *do* keep objects, particularly sentimental ones, for a long time. First we wanted to understand what they kept and why. We met people in their homes and had them talk about their sentimental things. We had them go in their basements and unpack boxes of things they couldn't bring themselves to part with. We found a worthless chunk of plastic that was deeply sentimental; a ladle from a Great Aunt, hung from a stove and still used every day; and a box of baby toys, kept for the day when an adopted son might want them as a connection to his birth parents.

"Essentially any sentimental object has become sentimental because it has moved beyond being a mere object in isolation to being an object that embodies an association with some other entity." On Human Remains, Microsoft Research, 2010.

Objects in Bereavement

We also know that many objects change hands when someone dies. We wanted to understand what role they played once this had happened. We interviewed people who were recently bereaved and had them tell us about the objects they were left, as well as the things they might pass on themselves. We found a diary with mundane but meaningful entries; a sculpture that was being consciously left to crumble in the rain; and a SIM card kept in a wooden box, brought out annually in order to read the messages it contained.

"So many of the diaries just say things like 'Cleaned kitchen. Joy went to rehearsal all day. I did some gardening. Took a nap.' ... just really dull, ordinary, everyday things [that] seem so boring, but now they're really important ...there's a whole social history of our lives in there." Reciprocity Deep Storage and Letting Go, Microsoft Research, 2010.

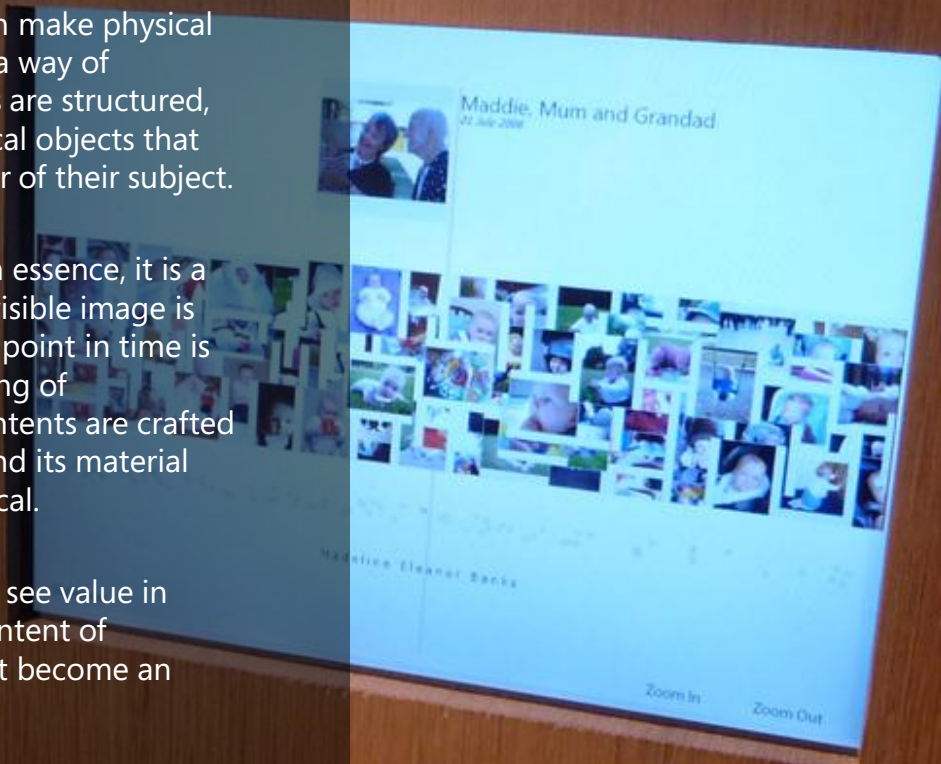
Background: A stack of diaries.

Object #1: Timecard

When people die their families often make physical photo albums or photo collages as a way of remembering them. These creations are structured, tell the story of a life, and are physical objects that can be seen in a home as a reminder of their subject.

Timecard is the digital equivalent. In essence, it is a digital photo frame, but when any visible image is clicked, a timeline appears and that point in time is navigated to. It encourages the telling of chronological stories of a life. Its contents are crafted by the family, like a photo album, and its material form is deliberately non-technological.

We like to think that a family would see value in both the form and especially the content of Timecard, to the extent that it might become an heirloom in its own right.



Above: Timecard in slideshow and timeline modes.
Background: Timecard, showing the timeline of a young child as she grows up.

Object #2: Digital Slide Viewer

When someone dies, the online services that they leave behind, such as Facebook and Flickr, become part of their estate. The bereaved have to decide what to do with it all.

With the Digital Slide Viewer we imagine that a family has inherited their grandmother's Flickr account. She uploaded photos to it for many years. Rather than maintaining the account, the family has decided instead to have it backed up to a digital viewing device, that gives them the reassurance of exactly where the photos are, and allows them to be kept alongside other sentimental objects like photo albums and framed pictures.

The Digital Slide Viewer comes in a presentation case containing slides, each of which is associated with a different set of online photos. Pushing the slide into the viewer reveals those photos. Family members can then browse through them, and use the device to reminisce and tell stories of their relative in the comfort of their home.

Richard Banks
**The Flickr
Collection of
Richard Banks**
July 2004 to Nov 2009



*Above: Opening, picking a slide and viewing photos on the viewer.
Background: Viewing photos on the Digital Slide Viewer.*

Object #3: Backup Box

Earlier we mentioned a physical diary, left to one of our research participants, in which mundane entries such as “cleaned the kitchen today” had become somehow poignant with the passage of time.

We wondered how today’s mundane messages, posted to Twitter, telling our friends where we are and what we are doing, might similarly become meaningful with time. Might they be a valuable resource for us, or for our offspring, in 30 years or more as a way of looking back and reflecting on our lives in 2011?

Backup Box is a digital store of Tweets. It sits in the corner of a home, copying our messages off the web, keeping them for a day in the future when we may want to revisit them. It is insurance for our memories. Under the lid of the box is a timeline of tweets that one day we might browse through.



*Above: Opening, viewing and revealing a Tweet.
Background: Backup Box with the lid closed.*

Conclusions

We have used these three artefacts to discuss issues of longevity and legacy amongst ourselves, with our research participants and with employees at Microsoft.

Some of the issues they have help highlight include:

Technological Robustness. Most displays will not last 10 years, let alone the lifetimes that we describe.

Service Ownership. Thinking of online content as having long term value helps us ask questions about our obligations to our customers in the long term, as well as issues of ownership and access.

Sentiment Over Time. If mundane content can become more sentimental over time it makes us question strategies for cleaning out and deleting content in the short term.