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Elise van den Hoven

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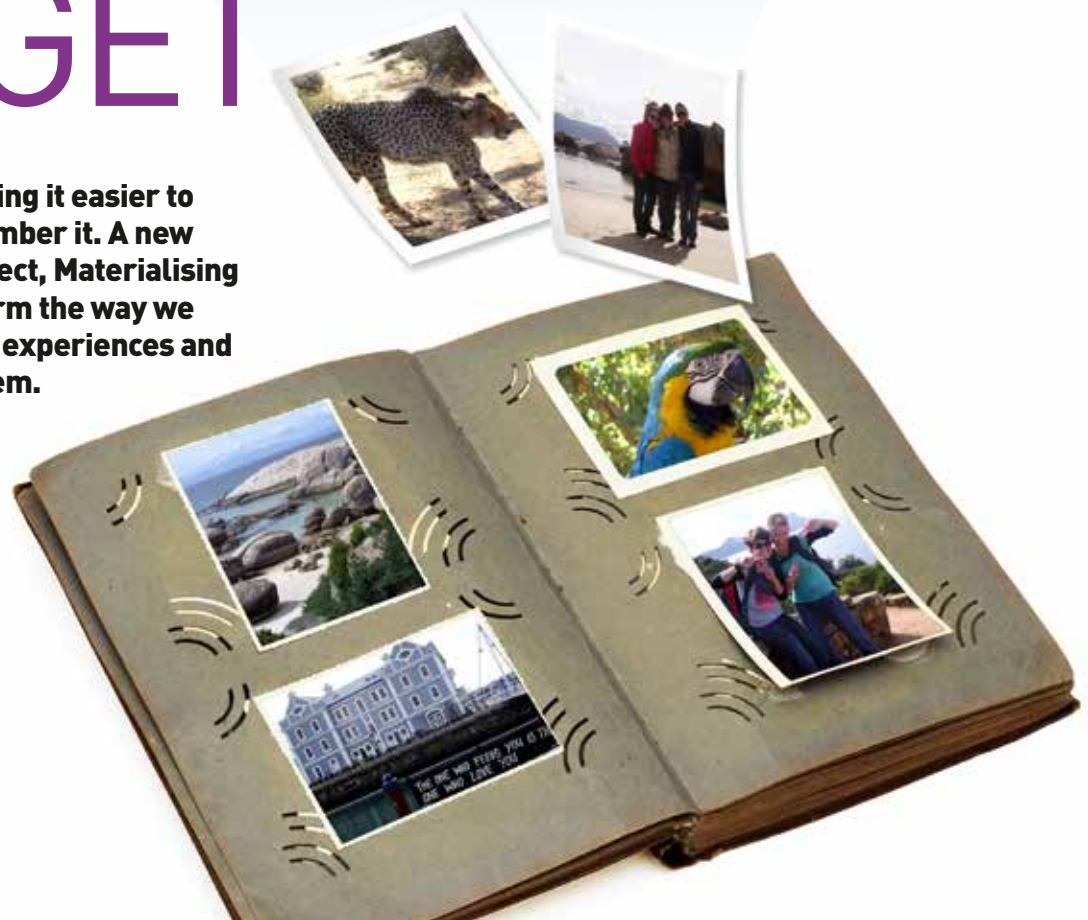
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REMEMBERING TO FORGET

Digital devices may be making it easier to record life, but not to remember it. A new international research project, Materialising Memories, is set to transform the way we capture and store personal experiences and make it easier to re-live them.



"I think all of our mums created photo albums; at least mine did, but we don't anymore," says Associate Professor in UTS's Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, and the Netherlands' Eindhoven University of Technology's (TU/e) Department of Industrial Design, Elise van den Hoven.

The increasing use of digital technologies, including cameras on phones and tablets, not to mention 'proper' cameras, has meant printed photographs are fast becoming a thing of the past. Instead, individuals are storing thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of digital photos online or in these devices; then promptly forgetting to use them.

It's a phenomenon van den Hoven is hoping to change. She is the Project Leader of Materialising Memories – a five-year, collaborative research project funded by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. It includes a joint PhD program that was formalised in July with a Memorandum of Agreement between UTS and TU/e.

Van den Hoven says the memory and interaction design project will take into account photographs, video, sound and other "digital stuff you collect a lot of because you can; because it's free."

"Despite that we have thousands and thousands of digital photographs people still cherish the physical ones more. I think that has to do with the physicality, but also with the selection process – you can't put all your photographs in an album, you have to select some and you create your own narrative and story. You don't do that with digital."

She says, with digital cameras "it's so easy to just press the button. If you really want to make a nice photograph you take 20, 30 or hundreds, depending on how much time you have, how critical you are, how badly you want a really good picture. Then typically people delete only the three really blurry photos and keep 27 almost-similar ones."

Van den Hoven believes we need to delete more. "A lot of people seem to think forgetting is a bad thing, that it's a bug of human memory; it's not. Forgetting is a side-product of a successful memory."

And that, she says, is one of the project's aims. "We will be looking into how can we make it easier for people to accept that forgetting is a good thing and therefore make better selections of what they want to make and keep."

The other paradox the team is trying to tackle is "that people want to remember, they create all these digital things to help

"PEOPLE WANT TO REMEMBER, THEY CREATE ALL THESE DIGITAL THINGS TO HELP THEM REMEMBER, BUT THEY CREATE SO MUCH AND THEY DON'T ORGANISE THAT IN THE END THEY DON'T USE IT AT ALL."

them remember, but they create so much and they don't organise it that in the end they don't use it at all." And that is where 'materialising' the memories begins.

As part of the project, van den Hoven has enlisted two Professors from TU/e – Berry Eggen and Panos Markopoulos – as well as four PhD students – Mendel Broekhuijsen and Ine Mols from TU/e and Doménique van Gennip and Annemarie Zijlema from UTS (all of the students will have the opportunity to graduate with a joint PhD from both institutions).

Exactly how the images will be curated and retrieved, van den Hoven says, "that's the million dollar question".

"You can't put memories in a device; they can only stay in your head because they're yours, they're personal and they keep on changing. A lot of people still think if you take a photograph you 'catch' the memory, which is nonsense.

"I'm looking at how we can shape our environments to support remembering better."

Central to remembering, says van den Hoven, are "memory cues" – things like colours, smells, sounds and images.

"What they do is facilitate your reconstruction process.

"In your brain you store concepts and relations between concepts and when you reconstruct you assume if they have a strong relation that is what happened."

For example, "I'm Dutch, and in the Netherlands, when you have breakfast you eat a sandwich with cheese. So for me 'breakfast', 'sandwich' and 'cheese' are very closely related.

"If you were to ask me what I had for breakfast on a random date then statistically chances are highest that I had a cheese sandwich, so I will probably tell you I had a sandwich with cheese. But I actually don't know what happened on that day, and it doesn't matter. That's the fun thing of it."

Though 256 different types of memories have been identified in literature, Materialising Memories is focused only on one – autobiographical memory. This type of memory is used to shape your identity and opinions, build and maintain relationships and solve problems. "But none

of these require the absolute truth. I mean it doesn't matter if I tell you I ate a cheese sandwich for breakfast."

What does matter is helping people retrieve these memories in the first place. To do this, van den Hoven and her team will soon be calling for research participants to help them find out what people want to remember and how they want to remember it.

Based on what they find, each of the PhD students will then undertake a separate line of inquiry into how remembering can be facilitated.

Next month, to kick start the project, Broekhuijsen and Mols will arrive at UTS for a month of study. As will Distinguished Visiting Scholar and Director of the Digital World Research Centre at the University of Surrey David Frohlich, who will be consulting on the project.

"He's fantastic," says van den Hoven. "I've been collaborating with him for a long time, currently we are co-supervising a PhD student funded by Microsoft Research Cambridge. David's research is quite related to mine, since he has worked for Hewlett Packard Labs on the future of photography and still works in that area."

Right now though, van den Hoven says, the way most people are storing digital media isn't working.

"Digital photos aren't supporting human memory the way people intended them to and the way physical photos do.

"People used to put their photo albums on display for a reason, because they wanted to share them with other people, but that's very hard with black screens.

"We're looking at how we can use these digital media to their full advantage and bring them back into the physical world again."

To find out more, collaborate or volunteer as a research participant, visit materialisingmemories.com

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