

Image conscious

October 21, 2014

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Fiona McGill

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Connie Golsteijn with her Cuebs which provide photographic cues. *Photo: Bart van Overbeeke*

Remembering and forgetting are vital skills for managing digital photo overload.

At first, the memories are vivid and exciting as the newly returned globetrotters recount their holiday to family and friends. Soon, life gets busy and the memories fade. Happily, the couple captured the big moments on smartphones (one each) and a digital camera. Those 2000 digital photographs, stored on a computer hard drive, are the couple's best hope of reliving their trip – if they can be found.

Associate Professor Elise van den Hoven, of the School of Design at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), has devoted 15 years to exploring memory and how people can be helped to remember – and to forget.

She cites studies that tell of people gathering more and more photos of people, places and events, only to "lose" them in the vast jumble of items stored on their computers.

"People create too many images because it's easy ... I can take them with my iPad, my phone, my camera. Family and friends take pictures of the same event and collect them for you," says Associate Professor van den Hoven.

"A lot of people don't see the immediate use in organising them. They think, I have a search option, why would I? ... Or they think, I'll remember, but that's not the case.

"And it's never urgent until they have something to celebrate – a wedding, a birthday – and need pictures."

Associate Professor van den Hoven's long-term project, Materialising Memories, is also the name of her current research, a five-year collaboration between UTS and Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands. Most of her research has focused on people with healthy memory but more recently she has begun working with people with impaired memory, through a partnership with the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPAH) in Sydney.

Dr Laurie Miller, a neuropsychologist at RPAH, says her collaboration with the UTS project is aimed at finding ways to improve daily life for people with memory disorders. Dr Miller works with neurology patients and their carers and says she is "fascinated by the possibilities of using design research to learn more about human behaviour".

Associate Professor van den Hoven's immediate priority is to make people aware of memory – to recognise what's worth keeping and what can be forgotten. Having a healthy memory does not mean automatic recall, and most people are guilty of overestimating their memory.

"Because we can't predict what we'll need when, we're all very scared of forgetting ... the paradox is that if you're trying to remember too much, then you forget everything.

"We need to filter, to be selective. There are reasons we remember certain things and not others ... memory needs work. It's like study at high school – if you want to remember something you need to put in the effort."

Associate Professor van den Hoven became involved in memory study when she embarked on her PhD project at a big electronics company in the

Netherlands. The digital camera was just taking off and the company hoped to build a device that could contain all a person's memories.

"One of the first things I did was study the human memory and of course you can't make a memory browser because it's all in the head, it's organic ... but you can have a device of triggers, cues," Associate Professor van den Hoven says. "The key element of my work for the past 15 years is all about the cues – how do we help people remember through a little bit of information that triggers something?"

"A lot of people assume that human memory is just the same as computer memory, where everything is just stored the way it was ... but that's not what our human memory was designed for. It changes in the context, it changes in the situation, and it changes because your image of yourself changes, your identity changes. As you mature, you bring a different perspective to events."

Associate Professor van den Hoven says she wants to explore how to create products that will create our digital media but also require us to put in effort – "so it's not just snap, snap and you have a photograph".

Social media networks such as Instagram and Pinterest can provide cues but they contain so much information that the cues may be difficult to discern. "You can pick out cues – one thing that suddenly does something to you. The cue makes itself known to you if you're ready for it."

Associate Professor van den Hoven is also keen to go beyond visual cues – hearing, smell and touch are possibilities – and says there is no end to the collaborative potential of her memory studies. She is working with psychologists, neuropsychologists, industrial designers, engineers, social scientists, artists and philosophers. Musicians and textile experts are prospective partners.

"So far we have focused a lot on photographs but I think other senses have a lot of potential ... music is very strong in bringing people back to certain events or emotional situations."

Smell is worth investigating, she says, though it is a difficult sense to design for – "smells can be very powerful [memory triggers] but only if they're unique and if you haven't smelt them for a very long time".

materialisingmemories.com

USING DESIGN TO PROMPT MEMORY

NAMES AND FACES – a tablet app, developed by a UTS industrial design student in collaboration with RPAH, to help people remember names and faces. Each day the user repeats a name, face and something specific about the person to reinforce the memory.

CUEB – a prototype of interactive digital photo cubes with which two people – parents and teenagers, for example – are triggered to explore individual and shared experiences.

STORYBEADS – a recording and playback device, incorporated in beads, to promote oral storytelling about traditions and culture in the indigenous BaNtwane community in South Africa.

This story written and produced by the University of Technology, Sydney, for Brink, a publication distributed monthly in The Sydney Morning Herald.

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