IMIM – a Concept and Prototype for Collective Documentation of Community Events

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ABSTRACT
In this paper we will present two interventions made in the context of two community events that introduce the activity of collective and participatory documentation of an event. The issue was explored by using working prototypes of a "video commentary collector" application (IMIM). We are interested in working with prototypes, not only as a way to validate and prove a concept, but also as an active strategy to collectively understand and reflect on the existing and emerging new practices of communities. Our exploration suggests an approach for achieving "artful" and meaningful integration of different media with existing and emerging practices of a community.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

General Terms
Design

Keywords
Participatory design, community practices, prototypes, interaction design, social software

1. INTRODUCTION
Different kinds of communities are increasingly using new information and communication technologies to coordinate their efforts, share experiences and engage in various collective activities. The possibility for open participation, availability of information for all members and other positive effects seem to be the reason for using new technologies to support communities' endeavours. The amount of "social software" and community support applications that start to be available (especially through the Internet) testify for the fact that this is a growing area of interest and development.

From the Participatory Design perspective, it is important to take into consideration the community's existing practices, habits, limitations of technology use and see how both, old and new, could be integrated in meaningful and "artful" ways [9] when introducing new tools for the community. The goal of our design exploration was to look into a particular community with an aim of supporting its collective cognitive and dialogical processes through new designs and new types of media. At the same time we aimed to encourage them to reflect on their current practices and develop new ones.

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2. EXPLORING COMMUNITY PRACTICES
Communities can be characterized as groups of people who share values, interests and collaborate or help each other in the context of their common interests [7]. Conversely, practices may be seen as everyday "ordinary behaviour" of a group of people in real-life settings, the space where actions and utterances are situated [10] [11]. The life of every community includes shared forms of activity and communal resources around which community endeavours are organized, mediated and mutual relationships are created. Among other important things, practices include the activities through which particular kinds of media, information and communication technologies are used.

The background of this exploration is an attempt to understand and generate a design intervention in the community practices of our department, the Media Lab at the University of Art and Design Helsinki (Media Lab UIAH).

2.1 Documenting conversations?
Among the many practices that we share in this community is that of a "demo day". During the two annual demo days people present to each other their recent work, both on stage, as short presentations, and through exhibition of small installations and demos. In pragmatic terms, the events are supposed to show the current state of affairs in the department. At the same time, demo days reiterate participants' membership in the community, through active participation as presenters or attendance as observers. The community invests quite a lot of effort and energy in the preparation for the event, but has very little means to reflect on it afterwards. Many people loose valuable feedback opportunities because of the lack of a coordinated effort to produce useful documentation. Our initial intuition was that making an intervention to point out this need would be an interesting and useful exploration of community dynamics. Even more, we wanted to find out, could we engage the participants in

making documentation of the event in an informal and collaborative way and along this, develop a new useful practice.

Informal commenting and conversations seem to play a crucial role in events, such as conferences, exhibitions, and demo days. Later on they may bring valuable contributions to the community in the form of new projects, contacts and collaborations. For many participants they are equally important as the official program of the events. However, many fruitful non-official conversations often stay only in the memory of the individual participants or in their personal notes. On the other hand some people may not find time to express their opinions or give feedback to their peers because of lack of time or other obstacles. Through our intervention we wanted to explore whether informal discussions and spontaneous feedback or comments about the event could be immediately shared with the rest of community. How could we introduce the idea of collaborative documentation in the community? How would this practice evolve and what qualities the supporting tools might offer?

Different tools like weblogs have been tried in similar types of events with interesting results[1]. We thought that in our case introducing richer means of documentation other than plain text, for example, video, could provide valuable insights. However, using video for ad-hoc documenting poses another series of challenges. There is little knowledge and experience on how video media might function, support or constrain a collaborative documentation activity. As a tool for dialogue among groups, video has been traditionally used mainly in synchronous mode like video conferencing. When it comes to generating a dialogue with asynchronous dimensions, text has been the predominant format.

Evaluating such a proposal is obviously not simple. The only real test of its practicability was to search for ways to engage the community in experimenting with us in a participatory way and try it out through iterative prototyping [5] [3] [1].

3. PROTOTYPING FOR MUTUAL LEARNING

Our starting points for these explorations are based on some of the lessons learned from years of experience of the participatory design community. These include insights such as: "effective design involves a co-evolution of artifacts with practices" [8]. "Design by doing and iterative prototyping" [5] are important steps for enhancing the quality and relevance of the final designs and tools that we propose.

Our approach to explore "artful integrations" [9] includes setting prototypes of new design proposals in real situations and locations. Since the times of Henry Dreyfuss [2], pioneer of most of the empirical oriented design methods, and the first experiments of the UTOPIA project with cooperative prototyping [3], prototypes have established themselves as tool and jargon, for many traditional research and development processes. Nowadays a prototype is usually considered as an approximation of a product along one or more dimensions such as functionality and appearance, which can be represented at low or high fidelity [4]. Most of the discussion is about the ways prototypes could be used for testing already existing hypothesis or finalized ideas [4] [6].

In our case, the use of prototypes was also meant to provoke a more general discussion and ideation process about the feasibility of collaborative documentation practice of events. The use of functional (dynamic and interactive) prototype allowed us to introduce a system situated in real event location, in action, not necessarily in a design meeting or a staged testing situation. We considered the prototype as a tool, a "boundary object" that mediates people's discussion and enables designers and users to communicate in concrete terms about otherwise too abstract, unclear and intangible concepts [10], [1]. Furthermore our prototypes address a particular practice that we hope can be developed by the community itself in parallel with the technology. In a way our agenda includes influencing and proposing the practice, while understanding it better.

4. IMIM PROTOTYPE

So far the collective documentation design process has included few interventions in two different events: first, during the Good, Bad Irrelevant conference[2] that provided the initial push and a testing bed for both the prototype and the documentation idea (September 2003). Second, the idea was developed further for the Media Lab UIAH demo day (December 2003 and May 2004). The prototypes used in these interventions have been fully functional, but different versions of the "Immediate Impressions" (IMIM) software application. The application provides the community with a way to effortlessly use video documenting. The setting includes tools that allow people to comment on what they have seen, heard, thought or felt during the event, and enable comments to be shared through a common repository.

4.1 Design

On the conceptual level some of the basic functionality and elements of the prototype are inspired by features present in current social software applications (weblogs, message boards, knowledge building environments etc.) However, as the main media of IMIM is video, the circumstances and use situation differ from these applications.

Figure 1: IMIM installation

[1] See for example: MelbourneDAC, the 5th International Digital Arts and Culture Conference. May 19 - 23, 2003 (http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/) or CALI conference for law and computing (http://mysite.teknoids.net/conf2003/)

[2] See: http://goodbad.uiah.fi University of Art and Design Helsinki 2003

The IMIM prototype is set as an installation that consists of a screen displaying information about the event (schedule, map of the venue, etc), a web cam (for capturing audio/video) and a series of props (different hats and masks) to conceal oneself at wish, when recording an impression.

As the collaborative informal commenting of events was a completely unfamiliar activity for the participants, the installation needed to differ from an ordinary computer (see Figure 1) in order to suggest that there is some special kind activity associated with it. We used a high table to create a place for people to gather around with their coffee mugs, rather than a low table with a sitting place that would imply a personal use. Different props are available for altering one's appearance and/or reinforcing the comments (police hat, pirate hat, clown nose, moustache, etc) to emphasize the casual nature of the commentary, hopefully lowering the threshold for participation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: IMIM participants in demo day 2004

In the idle mode of the IMIM system, the screen is always displaying a "Live Video" signal to make it evident that there is a possibility to record something and attract passers-by.

A decision was made that, although it would be nice to record seamlessly and discreetly informal discussions, the tool could not have any connotations with surveillance. The choice to record an informal conversation had to be made by the participant him/ herself, explicitly and voluntary.

As a result of the iterative nature of the intervention, in response to general feedback and usability problems the application has evolved between the events. Since the IMIM software itself is not the main object of our study, we will describe the user interface elements only briefly in this paper.

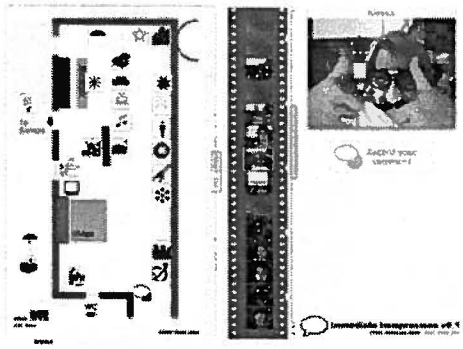

Figure 3: IMIM UI. Media Lab UIAH demo day 2003

On the screen IMIM user interface displays: 1) live video input; 2) the sessions, presentations or exhibits to comment on (as a location map or list); 3) the archive where everybody's recorded comments are accessed (see Figure 3). All the visual elements in the interface are easily customizable and editable. IMIM is not a demo day event specific prototype; it can actually be changed and adapted quite easily without the need of compiling the software again. An administration facility to repurpose IMIM for other occasions can also be used for editing and updating the program and other information in situ, to respond quickly during the event to any changes.

In order to leave a comment a person only needs to select something and hit "record a comment" button. After this a dialogue box will appear that allows the participant to name the clip, record, preview, save or delete it. When the participant selects an item form the list or the map, IMIM also filters the video archive view, showing only the video comments related to that particular item.

4.2 Deployment

Due to technical problems, the first prototype in the conference was introduced too late, so many participants did not realize the possibility for collective documenting in time. However, this experience gave us a much more realistic view of the IMIM functioning in the "wild", and valuable feedback Above all it confirmed that if introduced properly it could actually work and be useful.

The second intervention during the demo day was much more successful, first of all, because technically the prototype worked much better, but also because the idea about collaborative commentary was introduced to the participants a few days before the event. There was also a short "performance"/invitation during the event itself, in which the documentation activity was explained. Because of the better quality of data during this second intervention, we will mostly discuss this experience. The intervention lasted as long as the event itself, five hours. We conducted observations, invited people to try the IMIM installation and gathered informal feedback during and after the experience.

At the end there were fifty-seven video commentaries collected. Sixteen of them were gathered from the authors of different exhibits and presentations, before the demo day. They were made as introductory videos, in order to give the context for the work and possibly intrigue some attendants to visit particular "installations". The comments collected tended to be short and give either positive or negative feedback for the authors, such as: "nice graphics!" or "your presentation was too long...", etc. A big proportion of people left the message to the authors of particular projects in a very conversational and direct manner, somehow resembling a video chat. It was obvious that they understood IMIM as a channel to communicate indirectly with the authors of projects and mainly used video comments to encourage them to continue or give hints on how to proceed. In more than a few video comments there are several people appearing on the screen at the same time, interrupting each other and adding something to the other's opinions. This kind of comments seem to be more relaxed than others where there was only one person involved.

4.3 Lessons Learned And Emerging Aspects

The plan for collecting participant's feedback needs some optimizing, maybe a more organized testing can provide better input to understand interaction challenges. However, we believe that most of the insights and problems can only be spotted in the real context of an event and by taking into account the participants situation, motivation to comment, and the interactions with the environment and with each other.

4.3.1 Supporting the sociality of the commenting space

The deployment experiences show that this kind of commenting is much more a social activity than we thought initially: people usually come in groups, view the comments together and even make them together. The idea of extra theatrical elements seemed to work well. It appealed to many people and made it easier to leave fun and playful comments in front of the camera.

These experiences suggest that our first intuition about dialogical and social nature of commenting was right. Peer support and the possibility to leave commentaries together seem to encourage people to participate.

4.3.2 Extending the life cycle

Many participants said that they would like to have this kind of application running several days before and after the event, so that they can leave their ideas and comments peacefully, because during the demo day there are too many things to try out and see. On the other hand, the demo day situation sets participant's minds to try things out, touch everything, be curious and experimental; therefore it is an ideal situation to start this kind of conversations.

Having IMIM application running for a longer period of time as well as developing a web archive in order to connect this activity to the wider context and resources available are obvious future steps we have started to work on (demo day 2004).

4.3.3 Evolving a practice

During the testing we also discovered that IMIM as such can hardly be a "self explainable" application - the idea of collaborative commenting needs some introduction, as this sort of practice is not common in events of this type, people do not expect to have such an opportunity available. However, we don't see this as is a drawback of the system but an integral part of the participatory process.

Some users manifest that after they understood the idea, they actually got hooked and wanted to make more comments. At first sight and without being invited, they wouldn't have probably dared to cross the threshold and try it themselves. It is hard to create the conditions for change and reflection. As this kind of interventions evolve and repeat, people may start to appreciate or appropriate the practice. The fact that the video introductions of some of the work done already before the event proved to be a very interesting material (made relatively effortlessly) seems to suggest that the community can really develop a practice around this and participate actively with us in the design and development process.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Knowledge of practices and understanding of possibilities can be achieved not only through observations and analysis of already existing community practices. Situated intervention process, with design prototypes, can also be a way to achieve fruitful engagement of communities in participatory ideation process with the aim of co-designing adequate and relevant tools for the community itself.

Based on our explorations and the feedback from participants, we would like to continue encouraging the community to reflect on its practices (the importance of giving feedback about each other's works, or establishing practice of making a short intro documentation of the work before the events, etc) and in further thinking how this kind of event could be collaboratively documented.

A new design proposal inevitably changes the community's practices. It improves them if it connects meaningfully with existing practices and resources available. It seems that it is necessary to perform current practices and new ones together in order to envision what kind of practices could evolve in the future.

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