

Inspiring Coffee Breaks: exploring new ways and times to reuse old footage.

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ABSTRACT

During the development of their projects, design researchers often gather large amounts of video material from interviews, user research, workshops and more, that usually is archived after the project is complete. In this paper we present a brief review of a two week project intended to explore the potential of re-using old research footage. It consisted of a big screen, placed in the common kitchen of the research environment, showing material from old research, sometimes associated with small activities. We will present how, based on our study, old footage can be reused creatively and how it seems to encourage students' and researchers' engagement in 3 main directions: *creativity production*, *immediate conversation*, and *long term reflection*. We noticed that the factors that affected these outcomes can be grouped under four main conditions: the event-ambient mode of the installation, the relevance of the content for the researchers, the ambiguity of information, and the presence of activities. †

Categories and Subject Descriptors

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Theory.

Keywords

User research, communication, inspiration, video, ethnography.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the development of their projects, design researchers often gather large amounts of video material from interviews, user research, workshops and more. The value of this material is widely recognized because of its richness, and various research methods have been developed to exploit its potential while making it easy to use during the design process [1] [2]. However, the drawback of this richness is represented by its bulkiness, which makes video a difficult tool to work with for very practical reasons. Video material requires time to browse and analyze, memory space on computers to store it, and its richness requires designers to make sharp prioritizations of what to use depending on the project they are working on. This will potentially leave out parts of the material that might be useful from other perspectives and under other conditions. So far, little research has focussed attention on what happens to all the hours of video footage as soon as the project ends. We assume that in most cases the footage is archived and forgotten, and the same bulkiness that made it difficult to use in the first place, makes it even more difficult to access it later on. This happens even if the video footage could have value for other research projects and could provide inspiration for further investigation. Research has been focused on the development of software that allow ease of access

and browsing while in 'project-mode'. One of the few examples that addresses the issue of reusing video is the "sweeper" digital archive software system, which uses material from the repository of a particular institution and facilitates inspiration by comparing current and previous material based on tags related to common "musts" and "desirables" characteristics [4]. Tagging, however, always presumes that the tagger can appreciate any perspectives on the material that may later become of interest. In our work we wanted to explore how random selections of old research footage may facilitate its re-use. Rather than think of video browsing as a conscious activity, we wanted to draw inspiration from public art and its use of video installation to proffer a more casual and episodic experience. In the case of art, there is no deliberate search for any content, as with a search engine. The meaning of what is seen is to a large extent defined by chance [7]: the ephemeral interactions of subjects and their perspectives, spaces and content of what is screened are the elements that define the character of an art installation, making it therefore more or less meaningful. Starting from this point of view, we have developed a series of experiments that explore how seemingly randomly screened videos and activities can facilitate the re-use and re-invention of old research footage. Results encourage us to think about it as a source for reflection, creative production and discussion triggers in a research context.

2. COFFEE BREAKS WITH VIDEO

Before presenting our results, we will clarify the series of choices that we made regarding the location and the content of the experiments. The installation consisted on a series of videos projected on a surface or on computer screens placed in a research environment's common kitchen. The kitchen is open to staff, researchers and graduate students of departments related to Design and Business. People that use the kitchen vary both in their background and in their interests, and the openness of the space attracts also guests and members of other research groups occasionally. Patterns of use of the kitchen vary from quick in-and-outs to take a cup of coffee from the machine, via informal meetings to longer chats encouraged by the presence of a high table with stools. The large video screen was back-projected on a glass wall of the room (figure 1) and later smaller computer screens were added on top of the coffee machine and at the entrance of the kitchen. The study was shaped as a series of 11 experiments in which we "played" with the content of the videos, proposed simple activities, or arranged "video galleries" in the space of the kitchen.



Fig. 1. The projection on the wall of the shared kitchen.

We adopted a reflexive approach in which the results of each experiment would influence and shape the following ones. Our video material consisted of both raw footage and edited videos, mostly belonging to the department archive and developed during the past 3 years with the exception of two videos, part of ongoing projects. Contents ranged from footage of ethnographic fieldwork of demining practices in Africa, to studio workshops and presentations. We had two reasons for picking a space like the kitchen for screening old research videos. First, placing the screen in the kitchen would allow an engagement with old footage without interfering with the actual work of researchers, allowing participants to keep focused on their own projects. At the same time it would permit a casual interaction with the screen, given the transitional and dynamic character of the kitchen. Second, the kitchen represents a social, less institutional place, where different people might interact informally, exchange ideas and possibly engage in conversations. In their 2008 study Waring and Bishop [9] highlight how “water cooler moments” – places and times for breaks during the work routine - could become a place for knowledge sharing and where different perspectives are compared in relaxed interactions. In our case, the intention was to exploit informal moments, like the coffee break, to encourage people to take a look at work that has been done previously within the research group, with the hope of triggering new ways to relate with old material.

3. DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Data for the analysis of the experiments were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews and written field notes. Initial plans considered the use of a video camera which could record what would happen in the kitchen during the screening time, or video recording of the conversations by one of the authors. However, we noticed from the beginning that, given the small space of the kitchen, the latter option of a continuous presence of a researcher with the camera was disruptive. For the purpose of analysis we named each experiment to highlight the way in which participants seemed to engage with the videos. We used Schatzman’s *Dimensional Analysis* [5], a method based on Grounded Theory, as a means to find explanations of the type of “engagement” that the participants developed with the installation and its content. By organizing and reorganizing the experiment outcomes against various categorizations, we managed to identify three dimensions that seem to roughly describe participants’ engagements with the video displays: *Immediate conversation*, *creative production*, and *reflective observation*. We tried to use these dimensions as ideal outcomes of the reuse of video, which could define a withing to place the various results of the experiments. As shown in Figure 2, we positioned each experiment in this space according to the degree in which they encouraged interactions with the installation or between participants. It is important to stress that these are to be considered only abstractions, based on observations of experiments in a short period of time. While different experiments placed closer or

further from each of them, no experiment explicitly represented one of these ideas. However, we consider it interesting and fruitful to define this map, in order to make sense of what happened, based on what reusing old material could foster in participants.

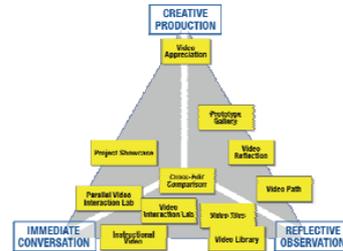


Fig. 2. The experiments are positioned to indicate which type of engagement they encourage.

4. IMMEDIATE CONVERSATION

Immediate conversation covers the situations in which the videos provided the trigger for a conversation between the people present in the room. Many of the experiments encouraged conversations, more or less connected to the content screened at that moment. Two examples are represented by the cases that we called *Project Showcase* and *Video Tiles*. *Project Showcase* was an experiment in which the screen showed footage from a workshop organized by researchers and a graduate students working in an ongoing project on supportive technology for arthritis patients. The video showed how patients try out a the prototype of a robotic hand by performing daily activities (i.e opening a jar of jam, or handling scissors). The screening of the video encouraged lively conversations. “I knew that [the student] was working on a project about arthritis but I hadn’t seen anything about what they were doing”, said a participant. The liveliest conversations happened when the student involved in the project was present in the kitchen. Comments and critiques on the prototype were raised always in a playful way. At the same time, the student involved explained some of the choices made during the project. The discussion for a short period changed into a playful brainstorming session where ideas or comments were expressed freely. “It’s really nice to have some feedback” the student involved in the project stated in the end of the day, “because there were things that I wasn’t convinced about either.” *Video Tiles* screened four different videos simultaneously. The videos stemmed from very different projects produced within the previous two years. The videos were looped for continuous presentation, but had different lengths (from one to twenty minutes). This installation developed a relaxed and less involved conversation. People would silently get attracted by the screen, and the exchange of opinions were limited to brief comments on what was happening in particular clips. “I think that in this way it is better.” stated a participant “When you see just one video at a time sometimes it might not be really interesting for you. In this case I can have a choice and look at what’s more interesting for me”. Compared to the *Project Showcase* conversations, these ones seemed generally less intense and focused, since most of the participants concentrated on different bits of the screening, according to their main interest.

4.1 The influence of relatedness and focus

Based on our observations – and comparing them to other experiments within our study - we found that two factors seem to influence the immediacy of conversation triggered by the installation.

The first one, and somehow obvious, is how much participants can relate to a video and its content. They may recognize the theme of the project, prototypes shown, or the people in the video, or the ones who have made the recordings. Having familiarity even with a little aspect of the video fuels interest and participants are more likely to provide feedback in relation to it. This is evident in the showcase experiment, where people felt confident to comment more extensively. When the relatedness to the content is lower, the conversation is likely to be more general. In another experiment, the *Video Library*, the screening shown footage a defining project in Africa, with which none of the participants were very familiar. This video generated great interest and general comments, but as it wasn't possible to relate to the content, it resulted in participants spending more time on trying to "understand" the images, rather than build on it. *Focus* is the other factor that played a role. As shown in the *Video Tiles* experiment, a screen playing several videos together, especially if not related, seemed to be perceived as an "ambient" kind of screening. People's attention was fragmented leading to a more passive engagement with the material. Conversations stay on a comparative level, without going too much into detail.

5. CREATIVE PRODUCTION

A second ideal dimension of participants' engagement with the video material is what we called *creative production*. This covers a type of engagement that encourages participants to build on each other's work and generate novel ideas by physically producing new material in form of sketches or notes. We have to make clear that we tried, during the experiments, to deliberately provoke this attitude. A series of experiments attempted to encourage participants to develop a critical stance towards the footage. We tried to ask participants to either comment on the videos, answer specific questions, or draw on cards the aspects that they considered most important of what they were seeing.

Video Appreciation was an experiment screening videos of people interacting with everyday tools. We posed the question "What do you see here?" and provided empty cards which showed three sections: title, sketch, description. We asked the participants to sketch their impressions and answer the question, or to take a card for themselves and write on it whatever they considered interesting for their own project. People used the cards to write notes with varying detail, some were quite descriptive, others rather reflective. Some people, for example, noted aspects relating to the movements and techniques that people used to open/use cans of marmalade or kitchen tools. (figure 3, right image). *Prototype Gallery* showed a very short loop of two prototypes in use. Based on the idea that ambiguity can be a valuable quality in design[3] we experimented by trying and give no contextual information, making it difficult for participants to understand what the prototypes were about. In an activity we asked participants to sketch on cards imagining, "What could these objects become?". Participants reacted quite differently to this case depending on their backgrounds. For most of them, the activity appeared frustrating because of the lack of information about the time or effort required to accomplish it. Other participants, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by the videos, and imagined ways to "reuse" the prototypes for their project purposes. One of them, for example, working on an application for a game connected to a social network, volunteered "maybe this could be reused as an easy login system" (figure 3, left image). A member of the administration staff said: "It's inspiring, I don't know what it is about but I've been thinking about it the whole day".

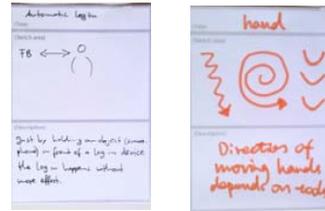


Fig. 3. Two images from the activities proposed. On the left a creative redesign. On the right a reflection on the interactions with tools shown in a video.

5.1 The influence of ambiguity and activities

Again, we noticed how the possibility to relate to the content seems to have influenced the way in which ambiguous messages were interpreted. *Ambiguity* seemed an encouragement for participants that had already had familiarity with prototyping, brainstorming, and creative work, but discouraged people who couldn't find a connection between their particular interests/knowledge and the videos. A second and more important factor, however, is that with all our experiments, creative production happened only if we explicitly asked participants to produce, and even then not always so. Participation, despite its interesting results, was really low. We respect the statement of one participant who noted "I am just coming here to get a coffee, I have some work to do, so I'm thinking about other things". Performing activities was seen as a time consuming task that clashes with the idea of break. However, despite not having received satisfying results in terms of participation, these experiments seemed to generate individual reflections with several of the participants.

6. REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION

The third dimension of our ideal engagement map is the *reflective observation*. We noticed that reactions were different depending on the screening time and number of people present in the kitchen. We saw quite a bit of solitary engagement with the videos, characterized by silent observation and no immediate reactions neither in conversation nor production. *Instructional Video* is a case in point. The installation was composed of 3 screens placed in different parts of the kitchen. These showed for the entire day a video about the the different stages of prototype development, together with the explanation of one of the projects that is currently being developed in the research group. The video generated immediate interest especially with students, who saw many links with their own work and their field of study. "It's interesting to see how people do things" was one reaction. Others stated "It's nice to see what is going on".



Fig. 4. Videos were presented in different spots. The location of the screen on the coffee machine attracted more silent observation, during waiting time.

6.1 Screening mode and pervasiveness

In *Public Screens and the Transformation of Public Space* [6] MaQuire et al. make a distinction between the use of public screens in "event mode", which they define as "crowd pullers", and "ambient mode", where the audience is more transient and distracted. We borrowed these two terms to distinguish an "ambient mode" (in which we left the videos run for long periods

of time, without any particular task prompt) from an “event mode” (in which 20 minutes long screenings with accompanying tasks would run in the most busy moments of the day). We found these shifts between a more diffuse and a concentrated screening mode to be influential of the way in which people engaged with material. As we noticed, if the screen was projecting for longer spans of time, conversation tended to be less intense, while the amount of “observation time” increased. In these cases, people tended to observe most of the videos while alone, in their trajectories between one desk or another, or quickly passing by to get a cup of coffee. Ambient mode facilitated the interaction with the screen on a more “individual” perspective. An event mode version, on the contrary, would consider the screening of new videos in the moments where the kitchen was likely to be used by more people in their work breaks. This allowed the creation of “shared surprise”, and therefore facilitated immediate conversations and exchange of feedback and opinions.

7. LOW OR HIGH IMPACT?

In her reflections on public screen installations in Birmingham, Kelly Taylor [8] provokingly asks “*Can big screens be accepted as a low impact medium?*” The question is obviously related to the idea of using far bigger screens in urban environments where people tend not to stop, but to just pass by and give a quick glance to the displays. Let’s take this question to reflect on our installation. In fact, even if the field of intervention is substantially different from the urban environment, where spaces and movements are much wider and unpredictable, we tend to agree that our screens can be considered low impact. In our observations, the screen seemed to subtly work towards a reflexive-provoking and inspirational goal and not be suitable for immediate outcomes or creation. A participant stressed how she found the installation provided for an “inspiring coffee break” that generated many discussions between the staff, and in general, most of the participants considered the installation interesting or inspiring, both because they would get to know each others’ work, and because they would discover material that they weren’t aware of. From the perspectives of the people involved in the creation of the content screened in the installation, the reactions have been very positive. Researchers saw the screen as an opportunity to gather feedback, or to ask questions and opinions of colleagues regarding their work, or what it suggested to participants.

8. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have presented a brief review of a series of video screening experiments run in a period of two weeks to explore possible ways of engaging people with old research footage. Our experiments seems to suggest that there is possibility to reuse old material, and that people tend to engage with the installation and each others in different ways. We tried to map three ideal dimensions of engagement and understand which factors affect them. Results encourage us to think that using informal moments and breaks would be a good direction to let people engage with old footage. This feeling is reinforced by the fact that activities proposed encountered really little success. However, we are aware that our considerations are to be based on a series of experiments developed in a very short span of time. This might mean that the behaviours observed might not be considered as a strong base to get to any conclusions. We also recognize that these same behaviours might have been strongly affected by the element of novelty that a screen in a common kitchen might represent, and also by the different degrees of knowledge of the participants regarding the content (i.e. Students did know very little about

some videos, and might have been more enthusiastic because of this). Though this means that our material doesn’t allow us to make any statement, we think that more attention on how the different factors affect the responses from participants might help us developing effective ways to let people engage with old footage. In particular, we would direct our interest towards two main directions: a first one that encourages a more social engagement with the material, in which more or less relatedness of the content to participant’s interest might affects the quality of conversations and feedback provided. A second approach, encouraging a more reflective practice, on the contrary, could stimulate additional exploration on the “ambient” screening mode, where a more diffuse and silent screening might support individual practices and reflection in the background, or could be addressed to a wider audience to provide information.

9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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