Memory Palimpsest: A Case-Study for Social Interaction through Storytelling

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Abstract

In social situations, meaningful interactions are often dependent on people's relatability between memories and past experiences in order to create and grow connections. Drawing from research on intimacy and anonymity in social situations, this paper presents a designed game, *Memory Palimpsest*, as a case-study for how a physical object can trigger shared memories as a means to develop new social interactions.

Author Keywords

Memory; Time; Play; Interaction; Social; Anonymous; Intimacy.

Introduction

In order to understand possible methods for memory-recall in social situations, an analysis was done of existing research in this area. Of particular importance were studies on intimacy, anonymity, and social awareness. Bardzell et al. describes the benefits of an anonymous environment through discussion of the game *Second Life*: "SL is a fantasy environment where users are liberated from the social constraints of everyday life…" [1]. This anonymity provides users an immunity in their actions, which leads to intimate behavior that may be unexpected of them outside the environment of this game. Regardless of the context

being physical or fantastical, intimacy results when the interplay between people and objects in a social space creates awareness between others [2]. Hassenzahl et al. share a similar sediment as they describe social intimacy as "creating experiences of relatedness" [3].

These ideas of relatability and awareness between people underline the notion of intimacy. *Second Life*, instead of having an object as a mediating device between people, enhances the opportunities for intimacy by altering the context to create and anonymous environment for sharing. These concepts of intimacy, anonymity, and relatability frame the space for design exploration and research through the question: How can a game trigger shared memories as a means to develop new social interactions?

Method

In response to this research question, *Memory Palimpsest* acts a research tool for analyzing responses to the game environment in hopes of extracting trends, commonalities, and irregularities that will allow for a better understanding of how memory recall can be channeled to enhance social interactions. The game is intended to be interacted with passively, in that it requires very little upfront commitment from users to engage with the game. This is achieved through the context of the game, the simplicity of the rules, and its contained nature as a single-piece game. Ideally, the game is situated in a social context such as a table at a bar or restaurant, where people can interact with the game regardless with whether they end up "playing." For analytical clarity, the user-testing was framed around three specific modes of interactions: Team-to-Object, Player-to-Player, and Team-to-Team. These interactions form the framework for which the results of the game will be analyzed. For this paper, *Memory Palimpsest* will be analyzed using this same framework.

Team-To-Object Interactions

The first interaction between the playing team (two individuals), is the reading of the rules which are contained on the underside of the box (Figure 1). Containing the rules entirely on the game allows for this passive mode of interaction. This also requires user to curiously engage with the object if they are to discover that the object is in fact a game. The rules are as follows:
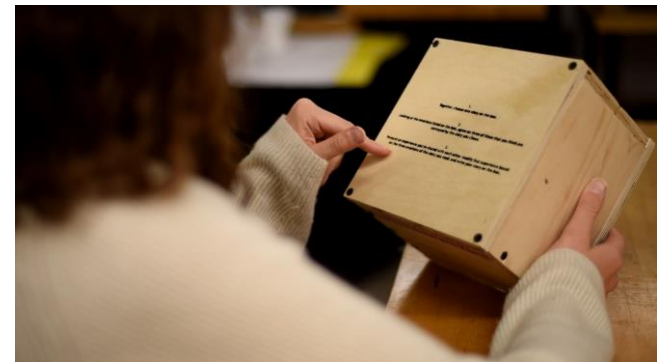

Figure 1: During user-testing, a player reads the rules to her partner.

- Together, choose one story on the box. (exploratory stage)
- Looking at the emotions listed on the box, agree on three of these that you think are conveyed by the story you chose. (analysis stage)

- Recount an experience you've shared with each other, modify that experience based on the three emotions of the story you read, and write your story on the box. (creation stage)

The second component of the team-to-object interaction is the emotions listed on the top of the box, which are brought up in the second rule (Figure 2). These emotions are grouped based on six overall emotion categories: mad, sad, scared, peaceful, powerful, and joyful. Each category contains two high-intensity emotions and two low-intensity emotions. The use of emotions not only act as a framing device when teams are reading and writing stories, but also form a connection between the teams that have played, or will play the game.
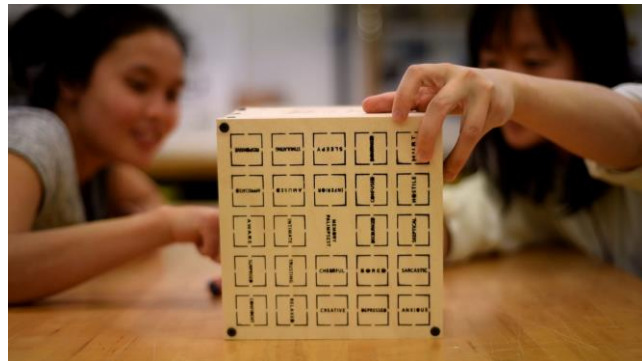
Figure 2: The categorized emotions printed on the box.

The last component of this mode of interaction is the physicality of the game as a constraint. The other four panels on the box are the surfaces where stories are written, which inherently constrain the length of the

stories without being explicitly dictated in the rules. Similarly, the provided acrylic ink pens offer various line thicknesses to choose from, which constrain the size of text, length of story, and style of writing.

Player-To-Player Interactions

Memory Palimpsest was tested with six different teams of two whose ages ranged from 22 to 27, and included 10 females and 2 males. Of particular importance to this study, however, was the relationship between the team members, which are listed below:

- Team 1: Close Friends
- Team 2: Romantic Partners
- Team 3: Romantic Partners
- Team 4: Acquaintances
- Team 5: Acquaintances
- Team 6: Friends

The relationships are important because of the divergent data during the user testing dependent on the closeness of the relationship between players. Because the game rules require players to recall shared memories, the number and meaning of these memories directly affects the outcome of the game. For teams 1-3 who have very close relationships, the exploratory stage was exciting as it allowed players to cycle through past memories while comparing them against the emotions they had chosen. This contrasts with teams 4-6, who had to rely on only two or three shared experiences, which were often less "exciting" in comparison to the earlier teams. What this afforded these teams, however, was the possibility for much greater creativity in the last stage. These teams fabricated entirely fictional stories, futuristic stories, and drastically modified memories that relied heavily
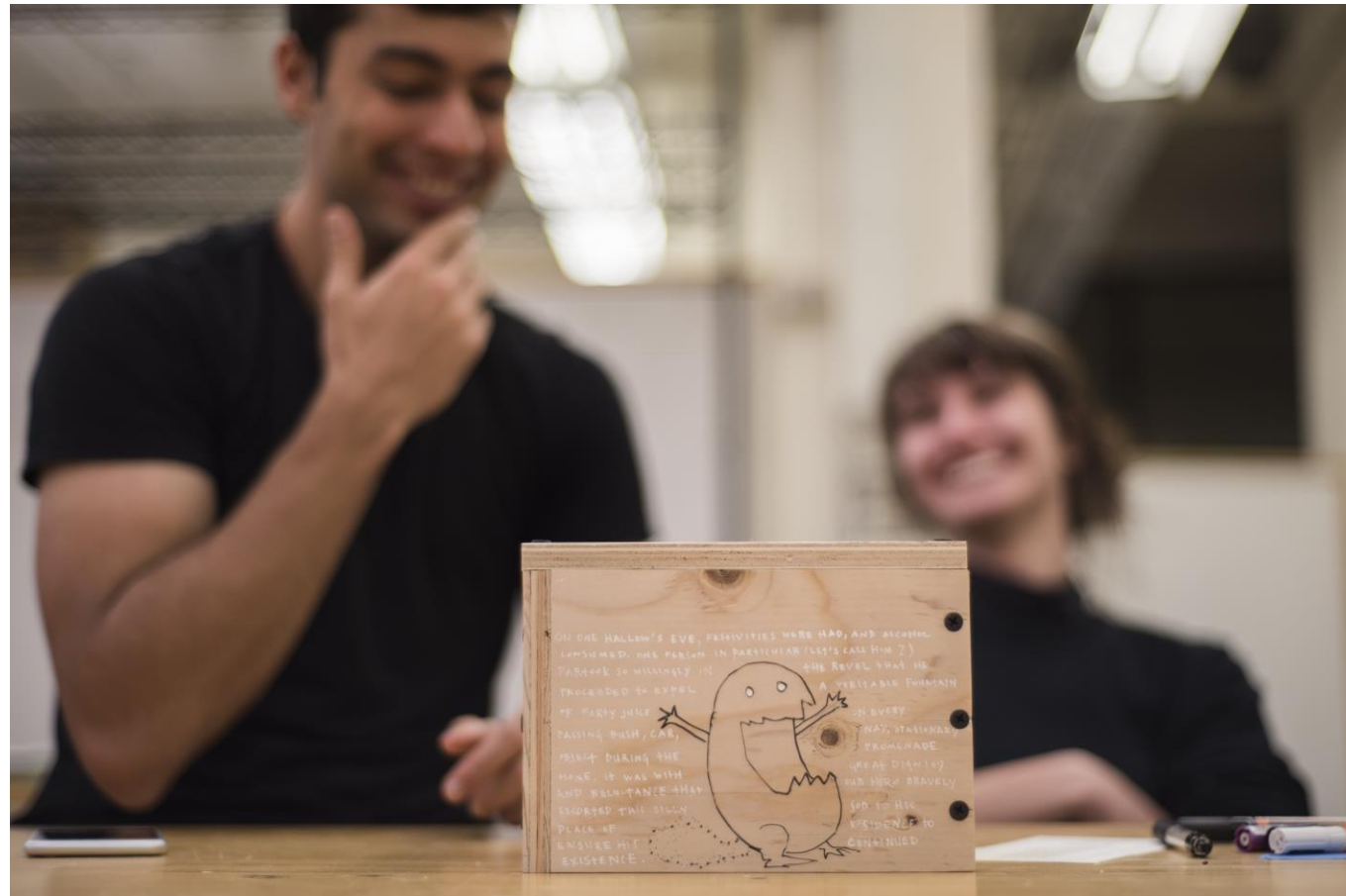
Figure 3: Team 2's satisfaction after completing their story.

This allowed for bonding over a new shared experience between players. Another byproduct of relationship closeness is the comfortability with discussing emotions with your teammate. This was less of an overall trend in the user testing as emotions are understood differently depending on the person. This was especially true in the testing when users' first language was not English, and caused them to interpret the emotions differently than their partner.

Team-To-Team Interactions

Memory recall often results from situational or conversational cues, and the existence of past team's stories inscribed on the box is a framework for these cues to occur. The collective relationship among teams requires a critical mass of stories before becoming most effective. In the case of the user-testing, this moment seemed to begin around team 4 and onward, as a dialogue emerged between teams. Team 4's story involved a character "Dwight the Dog," who was a reoccurring point of conversation and influence for teams 5 and 6.

Given the lack of specificity in the rules surround how to write, how much to write, and style of the narrative, a trend emerged that was dependent on team-to-team interaction. After team 2 added their story to the box, they decided to include a small icon-like drawing of a bear-a key character in their story. From this point onward, the following four teams all drew at least one image to pair with their story, a clear response to a precedent set by team 2. Without team 2's addition of imagery, it is likely that most, if not all of the other teams would have entirely used text.

Similar to this continued precedent of imagery was an awareness that the current team was also playing a secondary game between future teams. In the user test with team 6, a desire was expressed to make their story "exciting" for future teams to interact with, an awareness of their role in a larger collective game that was simultaneously taking place. This relationship between future teams is furthered by the presence of anonymity, which allows for the writing of intimate stories without consequence, and promotes a collective intimate experience from team-to-team.

Conclusion

Memory Palimpsest provides an insight into how the dynamics of relationships in a game environment influence the process of memory-making. Although the game design necessitates a reasonable amount of familiarity with your teammate, the affordances for different team chemistries vary greatly. This is also shaped by the lack of specificity in the rules, which allow for the initial creative interpretations to guide the way future participants respond to the game. One possible avenue of future research would be to user test several versions of the same game where the initial story is altered in content, style, meaning, and depth of intimacy. This would allow for an understanding of how the collective trends shape the informal rules of the game over the course of its life.

Acknowledgements

References

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