
The Cloakroom: Documentary Narratives in Embodied Installation

Ella Dagan

University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA
ella@ucsc.edu

Abstract

This paper presents the concept and instances of implementation of a documentary embodied art installation named 'The Cloakroom'. The Cloakroom is an interactive aesthetic experience which is made out of multiple interpersonal relationship stories and their connection to objects. People are invited to embody a relationship by literally donning a jacket and going through the motions of finding things in its pockets. The objects they find are then used as triggers to play pre-recorded stories, bringing analog artifacts to meet the digital content. The use of pockets highlights the physical intersection between tangibles and wearables.

Author Keywords

tangible user interface; objects; interactive documentary; storytelling; embodied interaction; interpersonal relationships; embedded computing.

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Figure 1. An overview illustration of The Cloakroom installation setup and embodied interaction.

Introduction

Sherry Turkle wrote, “We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with” [19]. Throughout our lives we encounter and interact with countless objects. Sometimes those objects become mementos. When objects are physical — we touch, see, smell and hear them — in a sense, by experiencing objects, we also insert pieces of ourselves into their being. To communicate memories to others sometimes would mean to pass on some of those sensorial

references. The activities of the mind are deeply rooted in the ways bodies interact with the world [21].

Jackets can be viewed as a kind of temporary shell people don. Jackets are worn as the outer layer of the body, they are positioned between ourselves and the world. The jackets people choose to wear could externally communicate to others about who they are, and internally make them feel protected and warm. Simultaneously, jackets create an intimate space

around people's bodies. Many times jackets have pockets which are used to store things on our bodies as we move through space. Pockets are a private place we wear in public.

The design of The Cloakroom experience began with asking, how could we share personal memories with strangers? Could we find new ways to share those memories without feeling too exposed? What could make us feel the interconnectedness we all share? Could ubiquitous objects tell our stories? I engaged unknowingly with an "autobiographical design" approach [10], initially serving my own need by designing a sharing method for my own personal stories of relations, as means for catharsis. As The Cloakroom developed it was inspired by popular projects such as Humans of New York [7] and StoryCorps [14]. Both projects compile diverse documentary personal stories and share them with the public. Similarly, the goal of The Cloakroom is to create a collection of diverse people's personal relationship stories.

The physical design of the installation is hoping to achieve Mark Weiser's early ubiquitous computing ideas. Embedding the technology in the environments and thus making it disappear [20]. The purpose of this installation is that the main focus of attention will be the aesthetic experience and not the computing device. Objects and clothing come with their histories, they are the design fabric of our environments. This project could remind HCI researchers and practitioners of the interwoven history tangible design affords and is aligned with the longstanding HCI approach to ubiquitous computing.

The Cloakroom is an embodied interaction of enriched emotional and sensory exploration. You learn about someone else's memories by wearing a jacket, rummaging through its pockets and listening to recorded stories playing in headphones. This creates a kinesthetically intimate and cozy experience. Links are embedded in tangible objects which are placed inside jacket pockets. The use of objects to trigger narratives to play sets a nonlinear structure for the exploration.

Related Aesthetic Work

The Cloakroom has much in common with The Reading Glove [15, 16] in terms of the tangible User Interface (TUI) for interactive storytelling as well as in the underlying technology and the attention to ubiquitous objects as story triggers. Drawing attention to the objects we hold in our pockets and their stories was also explored in the Portable Effects exhibit at the Exploratorium in San Francisco. There, the exhibit creators experimented with asking people to expose what they carried in their pockets and reflect on these objects, using input stations. The creators found that "Many visitors welcomed an opportunity to introspect" [13]. In the work Pockets Full of Memories, visitors of the Centre Pompidou digitally scanned and described objects they carried in their pockets [12]. Both Object Stories [11], an ongoing project of Portland Art Museum, and Museum of Broken Relationships [2] collect objects from the public and showcase people's stories along with their objects.

StoryCorps's organization facilitates and shares recordings of people's introspection stories and makes animations to accompany them in support of their mission to "preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a

more just and compassionate world" [14]. Janet Cardiff's audio tour "Her Long Black Hair" [3] leads people through New York City's Central Park and manages to augment the situated experience by creating an alternate intimate soundscape, immersing the participants within the narrator's fragmented storytelling, similar to a stream of consciousness. The stories are triggered by a collection of old photographs which the artist found in a flea market, and are overlaid on the environment. Although the photographs are viewed through a smartphone device, these are reminiscent of physical objects. The effect of using intimate voice recording for telling personal stories was carried into The Cloakroom as part of the aesthetic experience.

The Cloakroom Experience

Tangible Narrative Navigation

The Cloakroom is an aesthetic experience of full body interaction with analog artefacts, which mask digital technology. The artefacts are used as analog triggers to play and navigate the recorded stories (digital content). The installation is made out of a collection of jackets and a whole array of small objects which are placed inside the pockets of the jackets, see Figures 1 and 2 for installation illustration. See project video link in references [4].

Visitors to the installation experience stories of personal relationships by donning jackets from the installation, searching their pockets, finding objects and listening to the pre-recorded stories which relate to these objects and to the relationship, all pre-linked to the objects using disguised near field communication (NFC) tags, forming embedded hypermedia.



Figure 2. Installation interaction illustration: The basket is embedded with a smartphone. The cloth is masking it to create an environment that feels mostly analog.

Many researchers have examined and demonstrated the value of using objects as tangible interfaces, and specifically for allowing interactive digital content storytelling [e.g., 1, 6, 9, 15, 16]. This project relates to previous work done in the field and corresponds with preliminary outlined framework for narrative characteristics of storytelling systems which use interactive tangible objects formed by [5].

Embodied Interaction

The Cloakroom installation is a collection of suspended jackets locked onto hangers, each representing a real relationship and serving as a documentary representation of that relationship. On a nearby wall hangs a key holder with numbered keys and a set of Bluetooth headphones. A basket is placed on top of a pedestal near the suspended jackets.

As a visitor of the installation you would choose a key at random from the key holder installed on a wall (see



Figure 3. A key older with numbered keys, each trigger an introduction story for a particular jacket.



Figure 5. A demonstration of how the smartphone is triggered with an object, and how it is embedded inside the basket with a cloth.

Figure 3). The number key you chose will direct you to the jacket with the matching numbered lock. That is the jacket you will don after releasing it from its hanger. You put on the Bluetooth headphones and place the first object you have in your hand, which is the key. The key is linked to an introduction story about the jacket you have on, which will start playing in your headphones. Then you will rummage through the jacket's pockets to find objects and unveil the rest of its stories. When you place each object in the basket its story will begin to play. In each of the jackets there are between four and six pocket-size-fitting common analog objects (e.g., bag of seeds, ping pong ball, bone, knitting needle, piece of bark etc., see Figure 4), which are placed inside the pockets and are not noticeable just by glancing at the jacket collection. All these objects are embedded with NFC tags and are pre-linked to trigger the particular story.

For example, if you had reached into the left inside pocket of the jacket that represents Brad, you would have found the orange juice box and which would play this story narrated by the person who knew him: "I dream about him sometimes though, one dream which was so real and tangible, I told him that I loved him. And he was lying in bed looking at me and I was in the bed that I was actually in, in that moment. I feel like I couldn't really believe it, or I was half lucid dreaming and so I asked him what type of orange juice he liked, because, I don't know, for some reason he really liked pulpy orange juice, I also really like pulpy orange juice. I think I asked him that in the dream to confirm for myself that it was really him". This story particularly highlights the way we associate things in the world and people.



Figure 4. Some of the objects used as tangible triggers for the digital recorded documentary stories.

A smartphone installed with the Apps Tasker [17] and Trigger [18] is used as the central computing device for launching and playing the audio links of the documentary stories. The basket is embedding the smartphone, its purpose is to keep the interaction feeling mostly analog, see Figure 5. When an object is placed in the basket the story related to the object will start to play in the Bluetooth headphone set.

Project Development

As an early proof of concept, I developed and installed three jackets based on my own recorded stories of relationships at the ITP Winter Show [8]. This was the first opportunity for public user testing and it drew people's attention and curiosity. There I recognized the impactful instance of experiencing one's stories being shared, without actually telling those stories directly to people. I watched as the stories were shared over and over again and felt an unexpected cathartic relief. As a result of realizing the opportunity for such catharsis, I wanted to extend and grow The Cloakroom, to create

an environment where more people could introspect, share their personal stories and listen to others' stories.

Next I invited people to contribute their stories to the installation. An open call for participation was sent to peers and I met with the ones who responded. The meetings were held as private recording sessions lasting about one hour each. Before the session the participants chose a relationship to reflect upon. When I met them we had a conversation and the responses to open questions were recorded. They were asked to record an introduction story. This story is linked to the key/lock which connects the jacket to the hanger. The participants were also asked to answer a few specific questions and describe the jacket the person they were reflecting upon would wear. The jacket they described served as a reference for sourcing in thrift stores the jacket used in the installation. The participants answered questions like: Who are you thinking about?; When was the last time you have seen them?; How long do/did you know them?. Then they were asked to think about objects which could relate to the chosen person or to their relationship with that person. Some people found this exercise easier than others. Some could not think about the objects and just wanted to tell stories about their relationship propless. So at times the objects served as triggers for story recollection and when no objects were associated, participants attributed the objects to their stories in retrospect. Eventually together with the participants, all the small objects were selected. After finishing the recorded sessions, I edited with a sound engineer the recordings into approx. 30 seconds to one and half minutes long stories. These edited stories were sent back to the participants to be approved for use before they were incorporated into the installation.

The Cloakroom was installed again during NYU's xStory exhibition [22], this time representing seven stories of relationships with a total of five different storytellers. While I have not conducted a formal analysis, people reacted to the installation. Surprise and excitement were common reactions in the moment when people found out the interaction involved putting on a jacket. One visitor reported it felt strangely intimate to listen to stories while wearing someone else's jacket. Another wanted to find more objects in hope of hearing more stories. A few people were flooded with emotions and became a bit tearful. Someone told me the stories he heard reminded him of his own relationship with his father. A recurring question was about the origin of the jackets; people were curious if the jacket was the actual jacket of the person they heard about.

Conclusion

I see The Cloakroom as an aesthetically successful project. The use of pockets was especially meaningful in this project. The pockets intimately held objects that triggered intimate stories. Also, the interaction with the objects happens kinesthetically before visually seeing the object, and before listening to the recorded story. This allows time for the person experiencing a jacket to project their own thoughts and memories on the object, and makes the interaction with each object and each story deeper. The Cloakroom project resonated with many of those who experienced it. It creates an opportunity for catharsis. The goal for this project is to grow the jackets collection by continuing to document a variety of interpersonal relationships. The project invites people to reflect on objects and memory creation, intimacy between strangers and their own personal relationships.

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