
Updating the Campfire Model: a Split-Flap Display as a Digital Storytelling Public Installation

Clinton Jorge

Madeira-ITI,
University of Madeira.
Campus da Penteada
9020-105 Funchal
Portugal
clinton.jorge@m-iti.org

Valentina Nisi

Madeira-ITI,
University of Madeira.
Campus da Penteada.
9020-105 Funchal
Portugal
valentina@uma.pt

Nuno Nunes

Madeira-ITI,
University of Madeira.
Campus da Penteada.
9020-105 Funchal
Portugal
njn@uma.pt

Julian Hanna

Madeira-ITI,
University of Madeira.
Campus da Penteada
9020-105 Funchal
Portugal
julian.hanna@m-iti.org

Miguel Caldeira

Madeira-ITI,
University of Madeira.
Campus da Penteada.
9020-105 Funchal
Portugal
miguel.caldeira@m-iti.org

Giovanni Innella

School of Design,
Northumbria University.
Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST
United Kingdom
giovanni.innella@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

In this demo we present MStoryG, a digital public storytelling installation designed to engage the public and excite curiosity through the repurposing of an airport split-flap display. MStoryG builds on the *campfire model*, where people gather in a particular setting and stories are shared around a central object. Our demo, a digital replica of the split-flap display, is fully equipped to communicate with its audience through a number of media channels (SMS, Twitter, Facebook). A number of professional writers have been enlisted to start the conversation between the public and the board, and here we present a replica of the experiment for conference participants to engage with. MStoryG creates the space for storytelling and sharing to happen and a discussion to be continued by its audience.

Author Keywords

Digital Art; Public Displays; Interactive Storytelling.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Evaluation; Design; Interface.

Introduction

At present we are witnessing a proliferation of new media channels that are pushing narrative into new experimental forms. The social media boom has led to an increasing dissemination of information and stories via popular platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and other microblogging channels. Twitter fiction events, for example, engage large numbers of authors to take on the challenge of creating and sharing 140-character stories with the general public. These changes are pushing the boundaries of storytelling, translating aspects of the oral tradition into the ephemeral space of social networking, which is already bombarding users with all kinds of information at a tremendous pace [10].

In this demo we present MStoryG, a repurposed and re-contextualized airport split-flap display that is meant to function as a catalyst through the concept of the *campfire model*—where people tell stories around a designated object in a specific setting. We discuss our process in exploring the digital art installation and report on the findings that led us to consider inviting international authors to become the main contributors of content for the installation. Furthermore, we take on the opportunity of this demo to provide a new source of interaction targeted for passersby, allowing them greater control over all ‘flaps’ available on the airport display.

Related Work

The rise of social networks has changed how people create and share experiences and ideas, and it has contributed to the rapid expansion and diffusion of new forms of storytelling. In 2011, the American film director Tim Burton proposed a community-created storytelling experiment called *Cadavre Exquis*, in which

88 selected tweets were selected to build up the story of Burton’s character “Stainboy”¹. Similarly, The Novel Iowa City Project at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop invited 8 authors and the public to interact and create a novel through Twitter [7]. Another film director, Steven Soderbergh, recently announced that he was leaving screenwriting to embrace Twitter fiction as a more open and promising avenue for creative production.

As digital technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous, our ability to interact with public displays is changing. Today’s public displays require a new set of specific design requirements. A variety of research studies have been conducted on public displays, including self-generative content public displays [9], public display groupware tools [5], digital interactive posters [2], networks of situated public displays [30], and public display systems that employ social networks as their content feeds [11][7]. Public display design guidelines [4] and new forms of attracting user interaction [1][8][3][6] have also been the focus of research on public displays.

MStoryG

MStoryG addresses a key issue in public displays and installations: public resistance to interaction. We approach this issue twofold: Repurposing and recontextualizing a familiar, recognizable display while offering users the possibility to interact through their personal devices, on their own time, without the requirement of being co-located with the display. We aim MStoryG at exploring the possibilities of involving the public in posting content publicly by subverting the ‘voice of authority’ that is inherent to these types of

¹ <http://www.burtonstory.com/connect.php>

displays. A travel-related story theme was defined to couple with the imaginary world of airports and traveling that people relive when gazing airport displays.

Evaluation Protocol

In order to explore and evaluate storytelling concepts for the public split-flap display we produced a high-fidelity software replica. The replica was used to test different possibilities of our board working as a public storytelling installation, situating it in real public places with real users without involving the expensive relocation of the physical board that weighs more than 800kg. The digital replica facilitated the initial evaluation of the idea and allowed us to explore the interface limits and public reaction. We adapted the frameworks of Mathew et al [8] and Brignull et al [1] in order to better assess the engagement of passersby with the installation, evaluating the three main user engagement phases or trajectories: perception, interaction, and engagement.

Probes and Installations

The MStoryG public installation was deployed over a two-month period at the main entrance of a regional university (see figure 1). Previous probes [6] led us to identify the preferences of passersby in relation to storytelling, e.g.: passersby preferred to read the stories rather than writing/author them.

Four invited authors created the main body of content for the installation while passersby contributed at will through Twitter, SMS, and Facebook. A simple filtering and prioritization mechanism based on “favoriting” and “retweeting” for Twitter contributions and “liking” for Facebook, defined which stories were displayed on the

installation. When there was a lack of fresh tweets, a selection of favorite stories were shown on a continuous loop in order to keep the installation active.



Figure 1: MStoryG’s FNC0313 installation deployed at the main entrance to the university.

Discussion

Most of the identified focal awareness threshold was derived from leisure spaces. Students and faculty were standing in a cashier line, sitting at the bar, or waiting for a friend, and would take the time to read, discuss stories with others, and comment on the installation and stories being displayed. Users reported a pleasant experience overall, involving a mix of curiosity and pleasure in reading the stories.

The location of the projection above eye-level combined with bright lighting conditions at certain hours mitigated the effect of the installation in attracting glances.

As expected, the majority of passersby preferred to read the stories, with a small number (8 individual users) contributing. Our invited authors reported being excited by this new medium with one author describing MStoryG as “a fascinating intersection between technology and humanities”.

Conclusion

Not all users are authors. General audience members were apprehensive about sharing stories, with some arguing that they did not know what to share and others doubting their “story quality”. In contrast, our invited authors found the installation and the chance to share content through this new medium fascinating. We found that a very limited number of passersby possessed an active Twitter account or access social networks from their mobile devices, an adjacent input interface is necessary to engage such users.

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