The Institute For Digital Life And Ephemera (IDLE)

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ABSTRACT: IDLE was created in 2016 to address the increasing ephemerality of digital culture. Digital technologies allow us to create and share content across the globe more easily than ever before, but that culture is at risk of being lost for future generations. As websites are taken down or revised, earlier versions are lost. Social media offers a record of daily life in the 21st Century but also vanishes into the digital ether. Devices quickly become obsolete and so how they were experienced and used also gets lost. The revolutions in storytelling facilitated by digital platforms have created fascinating, but intangible, experiences. IDLE is committed to developing an archive of digital culture that fully represents life in the 21st century. We used this backdrop story to explore what it would mean to loose such an all-encompassing archive or in effect all of our digital archives, as we certainly cannot guarantee the long-term availability and quality of digital data. We project that in 2020, a solar flare will have wiped the planet's digital records and that this will have disproportionally affected the human history of the last few decades. In this context, we developed and sent out the ‚Storytelling Box' with the aim to begin to recreate an archive, but also to engage storytellers and audiences with what it means to develop engaging story content. We document the storytelling box, document the ways that we engaged storytellers with the process and critically reflect on the outcomes.

1. INTRODUCTION

For an on-going research project, one of the authors of this paper has engaged with around 40 storytellers from the UK and the US to better understand how they see engagement with stories and what it means for them to develop stories that are captivating. The material concerns their practice, how they see engagement and their views on what storytelling is. It is taking the form of interview transcripts and this is the basis for an upcoming book [2]. The prototyping work presented here was developed alongside the above research to explore how to best try to bring the emerging loose network of storytellers together in the creation of something new: a set of engaging and captivating stories bound together by a common theme, which would also be accessible and engaging to members of the general public.

For this purpose, we created the backstory of the fictional 'Institute of Digital Life and Ephemera', or IDLE, set up in 2016 to archive the stories of the world. We envisioned a future where a global solar flare in 2020 destroyed its archive, and IDLE then set out to rebuild digital human storytelling. In this paper, we provide a description of our design practice around the IDLE project.

The central element of this design is the storytelling box that was sent out to transmedia practitioners. The box prompted them to create a 'captivating' story fragment, being inspired by the single recording of a story that had survived the solar flare. Story fragments were then collected together, presented and shared via the website that we designed as a part of the background scenario of this project (www.idleorg.eu). At the University of Nottingham this work was funded as a small, rapid-fire intervention to trial the introduction

of digital technologies into subject areas that don't regularly work with them [9].

2. BACKGROUND

Storytelling as a genre allows people to share their experiences, thoughts, or imaginations [4]. Digital storytelling is enhancing the traditional oral narrations with different types of multimedia such as, image, text, video, and music, with other communication tools [6]. Thus, stories are now collected and distributed through Information Communication Technology (ICT) enabled devices and platforms that can reach wider audiences. Moreover, technology has transformed the role of media audiences, from predominantly passive and mass viewers to being active and engaged with more control over media [8]. In this broader context, there has been growing interest within the design and HCI communities to understand the role of storytelling; to design tools that support design research processes; also, to learn how the tools are collaboratively adopted and situated [7]. In this broader story telling context, we drew on our previous work around physical resources designed to support virtual meetings [10] and research around the development of hybrid gifting [5]. In this way, we embedded our previous experience in bridging between physical and digital experiences and applied this to a story telling context.

3. DESIGN

We aimed to bring together our loose network of storytellers in the production of captivating and engaging stories around a common theme. With this aim in mind, we drew on Harley et al, who proposed a framework for the design of tangible narratives [3]. They analysed the storytelling systems that used digitally enhanced physical objects and recorded elements that make up narratives. Structuring our work around this, in what follows, we focus on: background story world, character, tangible object, storyteller, sharing of the project, and how we integrated those elements.

3.1 STORY WORLD

To begin with, we created a fictional backstory to put the existence of the box in context and to motivate storytellers to volunteer their time for our project. This backstory concerned the Institute for Digital Life and Ephemera (IDLE). We include the advertised description of IDLE below:

IDLE was created in 2016 to address the increasing ephemerality of digital culture. Digital technologies allow us to create and share content across the globe more easily than ever before, but that culture is at risk of being lost for future generations. As websites are taken down or revised, earlier versions are lost. Social media offers a record of daily life in the 21st Century but also vanishes into the digital ether. Devices quickly become obsolete and so how they were experienced and used also gets lost. The revolutions in storytelling facilitated by digital platforms have created fascinating, but intangible, experiences. IDLE is committed to developing an archive of digital culture that fully represents life in the 21st century. In only a few short years we have: 1. Developed new digital archiving systems, 2. Collections over 5 million web pages, 3. Gathered a sample of 200,000 social media accounts, 4. Archived 5,000 digital stories, 5. Synthesised and digitised the archives of 1,000 local newspapers, 6. Stored 1,000 digital devices and devised software to allow older content to play on new devices.

This was deployed on the live website www.idleorg.eu, which was kept updated throughout the project to give the appearance of being 'current affairs'. One of those updates included news about the devastating solar flare that hit the planet in 2020 and which wiped out IDLE's archive alongside most digital records across the world. When we contacted our storytellers in character, we then also included the following, as a summary of the on-going IDLE activities:

After the solar flare of 2020, IDLE has reoriented its priorities in order to address 'The Lost Decades' of digital culture. The IDLE team is focused on finding any digital technologies or content that survived the solar flare and developing new ways of disseminating them. This involves recreating a basic version of the World Wide Web to collect and share examples of digital culture.

This story set the broad background for the project and for storytellers to engage with us.

3.2 CHARACTERS

We acted as characters in this scenario and in the act of distributing the story box. Each of us presented ourselves as a member of one of the IDLE departments: Department of Stories and Department of Devices. Thus, we described

our role in the information sent out to storytellers.

3.3 TANGIBLE OBJECT: STORY BOX

Given our previously mentioned work on physical resources to support virtual meetings and on hybrid physical-digital gifting experiences, we quickly focused on wanting to assist storytellers through providing a physical artefact, equipped with a story to listen to and the mechanism to record a story.

In a brief period of design explorations, we considered a number of options that included different types of recording devices, types of props to frame stories to be created for us, digital postcards that would serve as prompt and recording device, nested box designs which would allow elements to be passed on from story teller to story teller and ways of sharing this online. These ideas were then discussed during a workshop with storytellers who might be asked to participate in the IDLE experience.

This workshop and our own design discussions resulted in a number of practical constraints. Given the time constraints of our freelancing storytellers, any solution would have to be easy and immediate to use. We could not expect them to spend too much time with our request. Storytellers expected to use their existing methods of creating stories, the common denominator being writing and voice recording. We were concerned about loosing stories recorded in the box in the post, while an online upload system did not fit our backstory. The storytellers and us were keen for the created stories to have a presence online however and, finally, our design had to work with the cover story.

Among the many, often conflicting ideas that emerged throughout a month-long brainstorming exercise, we became fascinated by the idea of making a bespoke wooden box containing several elements related to storytelling practice. Once thet had agreed to take part, we contacted our storytellers in character framing our contact in the presented back-story.

We presented the box (see Figure 1) and its contents as a gift in appreciation of the participation in rebuilding the IDLE archive. Storytellers received the box in the post for them to keep apart from the recording device.

Figure 1 *Story box. The box embeds a playback device that plays a background story; a recording device for the storytellers to use and send back, instructions and tea.*

We explained that a single story had survived the solar flare on one remaining digital device. We included this 'seed' story on a playback device, made to look like a technology prototype quickly built by the department of devices, set into the box (see Figure 2). The idea of providing the seed story was to frame the expected outcome and required effort in some way, carefully not giving the impression that the task would be too onerous. We also included the 'precious' recording device for the new story to be recorded on and asked storytellers to treat it very carefully, as it would have to be sent to the next storyteller. In actuality, we prepared multiple storytelling boxes with a recorder each to avoid stories being lost in the post.

Figure 2 *– The opened Story box, revealing the playback device in the centre and the headphones. Once opened, the box presented a set of instruction cards that prompted story tellers to listen to the one remaining story from the archive (see Figure 2 bottom left).*

Figure 3. *A return envelope and a recording device enclosed and sent with the box.*

The instructions then requested the authors to record a story for us and to send this back in the pre-addressed envelope (see Figure 3). No instruction about the desired story content was given. A selection of tea was included as a further small token of our appreciation for helping IDLE to build up its archive again.

3.4 STORYTELLERS

During this short project, we managed to engage five storytellers in total. One providing the seed story (and receiving some compensation for their time in this case) and four others who each received the story telling box to keep and who sent back their story in the provided envelope, going along with our background story about the IDLE institute. Four further story telling boxes were sent out but we did not receive a story back. Of the four storytellers receiving a box, three responded to our request for feedback.

Commenting on the engagement, one storyteller stated: *'The process was very interesting. I received a box containing an audio story and establishing the premise of the project. My story emerged almost fully formed as a response to this provocation. It wouldn't exist without this inspiring process.'* Another reflected how *'The concept called into question the role of archives in society, and what sort of stories would be kept in the future. This in turn set a fascinating creative challenge to write a short story that fitted into that structure. As it happens, I had been thinking about [the topic that I used in the story already], and this became the basis for the story.'* Two of the storytellers who responded to our request for feedback also kept the story telling box. One is keeping it on their desk 'Protected for the Future!' and another keeping it to show to students and states: *'I will use it as an example of a mechanism to trigger participation. An imaginative way to set a brief.'* Finally, one storyteller had the tea, removed all the items an is now using the box to keep small items in.

3.5 SHARING

Our storytellers were also made aware of the existence of the IDLE web site. This was designed deliberately to look like being based on old, recovered technology and presented as a static web page to go with the background story that IDLE is just about managing to recreate a basic Internet node. Storytellers were alerted when their stories and those of others went live on that site.

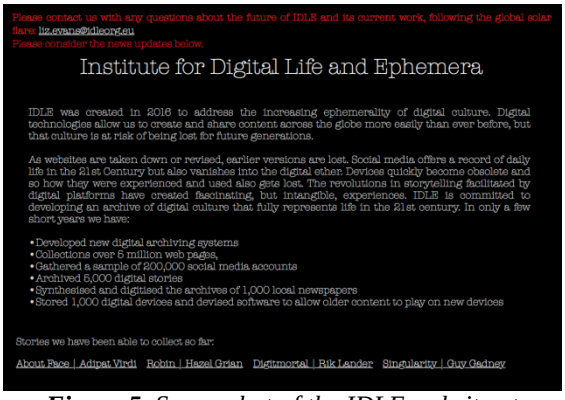

Figure 5*. Screenshot of the IDLE website at www.idleorg.eu*

With the site being public, our secondary audience was the general public having access to the web site. Storytellers and us advertised the site to engage others with the project idea but also with the actual recorded stories on social media, through email updates and directly to students. The site was kept alive with fictional updates about developments at IDLE. Finally, we engaged a film maker to make an in-character documentary about IDLE, which is available here: https://vimeo.com/271476359

4. REFLECTION

IDLE was a practice focussed prototyping project that aimed to bring a disparate set of storytellters together around a common aim, developing a mechanism to achieve this (story telling box, back story, sharing mechanism). It was relatelively low budget and executed rapidly. As we described, we engaged a relatively small number of story tellers and motivating them to take out unpaid time out of their busy schedules was difficult. Nevertheless, the base engagement mechanism worked for those who participated as indicated by their feedback and it can be described as broadly successful in involving storytellers

with the concepts of the background research (in storytelling [1]) and in generating new story material. While we believe that the idea is solid, generalisations beyond what we have described have to be done carefully, giving the level of reach of the project. We have been looking into trialling the mechanism in other contexts, and this paper will allow others to do this too.

4.1 STORIES

In addition to the seed story (included in the box), we received four narrated stories back via the provided return envelope (these can be listened to at the provided web site address). All recorded stories are highly engaging and captivating but in quite different ways. From slow reflections on the here and now to futuristic projections of technology's effects, the stories cover a variety of topics. Refreshingly, they are not particularly bound up with the solar flare event. They are good stories in their own rights, and as we have heard from some of our storytellers, they were triggered directly by our engagement mechanism.

4.2 FUTURE WORK

At the same time, we had hoped to have more responses. The box as a gift did not seem 'enough' for some storytellers to engage. Our original ideas were motivated by concepts of digital gift exchange that apply tangible artefacts as a wrapping medium [5]. Thus, we explored many study designs that would give the storytellers a sense of receiving the stories as a gift. In future, we can return to these to help create a more compelling surprise and greater connections, for example by sending the boxes without advanced notifications and sending and receiving a box between the storytellers so that, storytellers become the actors in the IDLE story.

5. CONCLUSION

In creating the fictional story of the Institute for Digital Life and Ephemera, we provided the background story for our story telling project. Our aim was to engage an existing but loose network of storytellers with each other and with a shared endeavour to create captivating and engaging content. By distributing a physical story telling box that allowed storytellers to listen to one story and record a new story, we provided a simple, re-usable mechanism for engagement.

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