

Collective remembering and the importance of forgetting: a critical design challenge

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the position that, if the goal is to better understand designing for collective remembering, we cannot afford to overlook the importance of forgetting. Memories are understood as relations of power through which we, as individuals and groups, actively negotiate and decide what can be recollected and what can be forgotten. And without being able to decide what we can remember *and* forget, we are effectively left without hope of becoming different people or creating different worlds. Furthermore, these choices and decision-making processes not only relate to content-generation or what data gets remembered (stored, displayed, etc.) in any given application, but they are always already embedded in our research and design cultures and practices. Ultimately, this paper argues for creating and supporting assemblies for deciding collective actions on collective matters-of-concern.

INTRODUCTION TO REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING MACHINES

There is an oft-cited Jorge Luis Borges story called *Funes, the Memorious* [1] in which we learn of a man with infallible perception and memory. Ireneo Funes had lived a dream-like life in which “he looked without seeing, heard without hearing, forgot everything - almost everything” until the day he fell from a horse and gained these remarkable abilities. Since his accident, Funes saw and heard everything, forgot nothing, and ended up spending all his time remembering these details. He said: “*I have more memories in myself alone*

than all men have had since the world was a world. And again: *My dreams are like your vigils.* And again, toward dawn: *My memory, sir, is like a garbage disposal.*” He dedicates himself to classifying and simplifying the vastness of what he perceives, all the while understanding it would necessarily be an incomplete project. The narrator, however, suggests that Ireneo Funes is actually incapable of thought as “To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.” There were so many details, in fact, that Funes eventually dies of congestion and the story ends.

Since I have serious reservations about the narrator’s definition of thought, it is a bit ironic that I find myself more interested in the moral of this story than in its details, but the idea that there is such a thing as *too much* memory, that we need to forget *in order to live*, is too important to ignore. First, it gives me a place to start imagining how much is too much, when and where it is too much, for whom it is too much, and so on. I can also begin to think about what we traditionally choose for our collective memories, how they differ from individual memories, and who decides. I can wonder about the things we forget because we want to, and the things we forget because we need to. Ultimately, and for the purposes of this paper, I can ask about the practices and ethics of remembering and forgetting and how

they relate to the design and use of new technologies.

But let me back up a bit before I continue. In 2003, after attending and participating in several design workshops and research conferences in pervasive computing, I became concerned that we might actually succeed in creating such ubiquitous machines of merciless memory. In our desire for capturing individual preferences and collective stories, I wondered what we would do if certain words or events were not allowed to pass? How would we, how *could* we, actually face the present, the future, ourselves and each other without the imprecision of human social-cultural memory? I questioned if we were confusing what sensors and databases remember with what we normally call our personal and collective memories. I inquired into the differences between dementia (as forced forgetfulness), nostalgia (as voluntary forgetfulness) and hope (as necessary forgetfulness). And I wondered what a *forgetting machine* might do differently from these memory machines we were building at some speed and with little critical reflection.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FORGETTING

As so many have pointed out, the question of memory has fascinated Western intellectuals since the times of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In Greek philosophy, for example, memory is often connected to discussions on making the absent present, and the role of imagination in such endeavours. More recent research has focussed on remembering and forgetting as socially constituted activities [2] and the current literature on memory and forgetting in the social sciences and humanities is vast. This paper necessarily discusses only a fraction of this whole and focuses

specifically on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Ricoeur and Marc Augé.

Generally-speaking, if a computer system is programmed to capture and process data, then it is considered a failure of the system if these data become corrupted, irretrievable or otherwise forgotten. Similarly, it is considered a failure of the legal system if an honest person is sent to prison because of missing or false recollections by witnesses. But in *Memory, History and Forgetting*, Ricoeur approaches the question of memory and truth in terms of capacity rather than deficiency: “that man is capable of making memory and of making history” and that forgetting is necessarily a part of remembering. Accordingly he continues the theme of (re)presenting the absent by claiming the “politics of a just memory” as one of his civic themes [3]. Ricoeur further distinguishes between singular memory as an aiming (*visée*) and collective remembrances as *souvenirs*, and the relations between the two certainly merit further study.

In any case, what emerges as most important in his work is the recognition that memory “has to do with the privilege given spontaneously to events among all the ‘things’ we remember.” In other words, both memory and forgetting are subject to power, and thus also subject to abuse. This scenario is further compounded by the inextricability of identity from memory, and Ricoeur asks the simple but profound question “What does it really mean to remain oneself throughout time?” For my purposes here, I will add “What does it really mean if the memories held by our machines never change or get forgotten?”

Take, for example, how selective or instrumentalised memory relies on selective and instrumentalised forgetting. Or how, when either

memory or forgetfulness are *forced*, they become authorised histories, truthful in ways that are actually improbable or impossible. In mandating official histories – or even more informal collective memories – we are *made* to remember and so, Ricoeur argues, memory has more to do with duty than with justice. But what of our simultaneous duty to forget and forgive? What sort of justice can we have without forgetting? What sort of hope can we have if we forget nothing?

In his discussion of the abuses of history in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche [4] describes what he calls “active forgetting” and also reminds us that forgetting is not simply a failure of memory:

"Forgetting is not simply a kind of inertia, as superficial minds tend to believe, but rather the active faculty to ... provide some silence, a 'clean slate' for the unconscious, to make place for the new... those are the uses for what I have called an active forgetting..."

More specifically, for Nietzsche the purpose of ‘active forgetting’ is to wilfully forget the past in order to overcome our traumas and transform our hauntings. Not dissimilar to Ricoeur, Nietzsche treats forgetting as a kind of affirmation rather than as a denial. In this way, forgetting becomes necessary for our happiness and for imagining our possible futures. Put otherwise, the value of forgetting is its ability to interrupt time or escape temporal continuity, and thus (re)imagine human experience.

Following both Nietzsche and Ricoeur, Marc Augé [5] continues this notion of forgetting as “rebeginning” or finding the future by forgetting the past. “The definition of oblivion as loss of remembrance takes on another meaning as soon as one perceives it as a part of

memory itself ... Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea ... Oblivion is the life force of memory and remembrance is its product.” And, again, it is in this practice of forgetting that we may find hope [6].

So where does all this thinking about forgetting and hope lead us?

Foremost, I have presented design researchers a problem of scale and action-ability. Sorin Antohi, in an interview with Ricoeur [7], questions qualitative differences between scales of memory and what is gained and lost in our movements between them. For example, if the grand-scale challenge is deciding what gets remembered and what gets forgotten, we find at the micro-scale, the scale of the everyday, our individual and collective decision-making processes within overlapping projects or enterprises. Antohi also discusses how difficult it is to transpose value judgments from one scale to another, and we are reminded that our processes and practices are also subject to individual and social ethics. The resulting research and design challenge is rooted in our necessary accountability: can we find ways of designing for collective remembering that vitalise the idea that we must be able to forget in order to hope?

DESIGNING FOR COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING & FORGETTING

Rather than coding memory machines and forgetting machines as either good or bad, risky or safe, we can explore what kind of hope is present in any given design process/product. I believe that the first course of action is to ensure that a social ethics is fully integrated into research and design processes at the level of daily operations in both educational and professional contexts. Instead of focussing only on individual

human conduct and professional ethics, Richard Devon [8] argues that engineering students would greatly benefit from an understanding of how taken-for-granted practices like project management comprise social arrangements with their own politics and ethics. If people and technologies are indeed mutually constituted, then practitioners must account for, and be accountable to, their everyday decisions and actions.

Following Latour's actor-network theory [9], an *actant* (the process/product at hand) must be made relevant to others, be made indispensable to others and be granted consent by others. These (inter)actions are implicated in decision-making processes at multiple scales, from those of individual research and design teams to those of organisations and nation-states.

If we apply this kind of thinking to our question of designing for collective remembering and forgetting, we need to begin, rather than end, with universal calls such as "do no harm". We also need to focus on local knowledge not just in terms of function- or content-generation *for* our applications, but also in terms *of* our overall programme generation.

In other words, how does a programme or project actually unfold? At which points and with which means are different people engaged in decision-making? What does this allow them to do? What kind of change can they affect? What hope of a better world, better day, better moment does it present? And how do we decide what constitutes a better life?

Flanagan et al. [10] discuss a growing focus in human-computer interaction on how to incorporate "values" into the design process, or more specifically, how to get designers to include values as

criteria for project/product quality and how to "design *for values* amidst complex factors including pre-existing bias". Ultimately, their methodologies rely on being able to "discover" universal and local values, "identify" value-conflicts, and then iteratively "implement and prototype" new designs and "verify" them against the relevant project values.

But for the purpose of this paper I am most concerned with what gets remembered and what gets forgotten. These decision-making processes come into play as soon as a project starts to take shape, and we need to engage the very things that resist or elude our discovery, our identification, our implementation, prototyping and our verification. As Isabelle Stengers [11] states:

"My dreams and hopes are turned towards any process which would get people interested in the consequences coming together and being able to impose their questions, objections, counter-propositions. I do not ask that scientists as people become better or more enlightened, I ask that practices stop ignoring each other, stop creating practitioners judging away what escapes their question."

In closing, and as I have suggested before [12], we need to shift from focussing on matters-of-fact to matters-of-concern that bring us together not because we have the same opinions or answers, but because we have shared concerns and questions. It is in these "assemblies" or "parliaments-of-things" [13] that we can achieve a critical convergence of difference in which design takes into account and is accountable to things that appear irrelevant or contrary to its traditional interests and assumptions.

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