Practice, Learning and Reflection: A Video Diary Experiment

Introduction

"Leafed through the diary a little. Got a kind of inkling of the way a life like this is constructed."

Entry from Kafka's Diary, kept while writing "The Trial"

For centuries, people have used diaries, journals and commonbooks to record the events of the day, interesting anecdotes, their thoughts and their hopes for the future. Writing in diaries helps people reflect and make sense of their lives, by allowing them to document initial observations and feelings about an event that they can subsequently revisit and review at a later date. In my current research I am looking to explore this process of chronological documentation and reflection, within the context of an online, multimedia domain. Specifically, I am interested in developing a software tool that will provide users with a functional and uncomplicated method for publishing their video content online, using a diary format as the display and distribution framework. The goal of the application is to provide for a casual and natural approach to moviemaking, where the process of producing video content becomes embedded in the activities of daily life, and as straightforward and manageable to do as making a written entry in a traditional diary.

To facilitate the development of this research, I decided to embark upon a learning experiment of my own, whereby I set out to design and produce my own online video diary. I was interested in gauging not only the difficulty, commitment level, enjoyment and ideal form of activity pertinent to producing a video diary, but I was also intrigued to ascertain how this particular display and distribution format would impact, among other things, my own moviemaking process. This paper recounts this experiment as an exercise in constructionism and describes my experiences relative to the theories of learning espoused by leading writers in the field of epistemology and learning, such as Jean Piaget, John Dewey and Seymour Papert.

Background

Diaries

Over the centuries, the keepers of diaries and journals have ranged from chroniclers to creators, apologists to pilgrims, confessors to prisoners. Whether they record their thoughts for catharsis or revenge, for entertainment purposes or for an imagined posterity, their words help us to construct a mental picture of who they were, how they acted and the times that they lived in. After reading hundreds of diaries, Thomas Mallon concludes with the following three points in "A Book of One's Own":

> Writing books is too good an idea to be left to authors
>
> Almost no one has had an easy life
>
> No one has ever kept a diary for just himself   [Mallon 1984]

Writing books is indeed too good an idea to be left to authors, just as making movies is too good an idea to be left only to professional filmmakers. Everybody has a story that deserves to be told and everybody experiences events that, however grand or minute, are meaningful and affecting to those involved. The written diary has been and continues to be a familiar recording medium of these moments for many, and additionally there is a long tradition of diarist's supplementing their written text with photographs, drawings, cutout images and other types of media.

The recent proliferation of video cameras in the home allows for the possibility of incorporating another media element into this process of recording and documenting. However, for many individuals, this possibility has simply meant stockpiling piles of unedited tapes in shoeboxes from which they are never retrieved again. Today's video editing software makes the process of producing movies more accessible and user-friendly, although the question of audience still remains – who is it that is going to watch these movies? I think Mallon's third point described above affords some solution to this question. His statement that no one has ever kept a diary for just himself contradicts a popularly held belief that diaries are essentially private and written only for an audience of one. There is always some "you" that is being addressed as the privileged other, some "you" that the author bears in mind as she formulates her thoughts into words that "you" would find of interest. The Web offers the potential for a massive, global audience comprised of millions of individuals with multifarious interests and tastes. Creating engaging content and displaying it in an appropriate format for such an audience still merits considerable thought and effort,

and is one which I have sought to explore by examining prior work with video diaries and current online publishing software.

Video Diaries

The concept of video diaries first rose to real prominence in Britain in the 1980's, when the BBC gave 50 selected members of the general public Hi-8 cameras to record and document their lives. Described by the BBC as an attempt to hand over the agenda to members of the public, the overall aim was to reflect the rich diversity of everyday life in Britain. The 50 individuals selected were given complete freedom in choosing their subject matter, and although the BBC edited the footage for them, the filmmakers themselves had the final say on what was ultimately broadcast. This series became tremendously popular, striking a nerve with the populace eager to see both how their contemporaries and the "other half" lived. The series has since developed to become Video Nation, an online archive, hosted by the BBC, of hundreds of videos from all over the UK.

Although the Video Nation site claims to be an online community, there is little evidence to support this assertion, as the videomakers are presented as anonymous figures whom we know nothing about and their work is presented somewhat in isolation of that of their fellow contributors. From the viewer's perspective, there is no facility for offering feedback or comments to the moviemakers or no forum for viewers as a community to discuss the works or post links to their own work. In researching alternative frameworks for distributing video diaries online, I became aware of an online publishing phenomenon that seemed to offer an exciting and complementary solution to the problem.

Weblogs

A weblog or "blog", is an online, regularly updated journal or diary where the blog owner can post thoughts, opinions, favorite links, photos, or stories. An estimated 400,000 bloggers are publishing content on the Web today, culminating in the development of a richly intertwined community of content producers, commentators and observers. This new generation of chroniclers use free, customizable software such as Blogger, Greymatter and MovableType to design the layout and formatting of their online journals. Of particular interest is the fact that the content of these journals comprises not only the posts of the blog's owner, but also the comments of

the blog's readers, who can submit their thoughts as additional posts on the site. This open-ended method of online publishing has witnessed the emergence of a vocal, self-aware and densely connected community of contributors and readers. It is this development that provided the impetus for me to embark upon an experiment of my own that would seek to merge the creative domains of weblogs and video diaries.

Audiovisceral.net

The video weblog audiovisceral.net first came online in February, 2002. In attempting to describe here the reasoning behind the development of this experimental website, I refer to the doctoral thesis work of a fellow Media Lab student, Aaron Falbel. In his thesis, "Friskolen 70: An Ethnographically Informed Inquiry Into the Social Context of Learning", he teases out Seymour Papert's description of a child programming a computer in an attempt to arrive at a "thicker description" of the process and context surrounding the activity. In so doing, he asked the following questions of the activity:

was it an assignment?

with what sort of motivation did the learner approach the act?

what connection did it have with activity going on around the learner?

what was the learner's relationship to the task?   [Falbel 1989]

These questions are useful in examining my own learning process and discoveries over the past few months as I grappled with this website as my own "object to think with". Audiovisceral.net was not an assignment, but instead the result of a number of varying motivations and purposes. I was interested in exploring the video diary as a moviemaking strategy in my own work. I wanted to invest my productivity with a new sense of urgency and awareness by publishing it in a chronological diary form, with the aim of producing content on a daily basis. I hoped that this experiment would help me ascertain how much time and effort went into producing movies on a regular basis and how this process affected the quality and type of movies made. I wanted to discover if there was an audience for this type of moviemaking and if so, how to connect meaningfully with such people. Ultimately, I hoped that my findings would provide a useful starting point for the development of an online software tool for publishing video content in diary form.

There are a number of people in my direct working environment thinking about different aspects of this problem from varying perspectives. The issue of everyday

moviemaking is the focus of several members of my own research group, while a neighboring research group is conducting detailed investigations into the social networks of the weblog community. My exploration was thus informed and influenced from its inception and throughout its development by the advice, feedback and suggestions of my peers. The activity of creating audiovisceral.net involved considerable personal, as well as professional investment on my part. I was excited to begin producing movies for myself on a regular basis, along with the overarching goal of discovering how this experiment would benefit my long-term research aims.

Practice, Learning and Reflection

Over the course of the last three months, I have learned as much about myself as a videomaker and a journal keeper, as I have discovered insights into the needs of the weblog and online moviemaking communities. I have seen how my own style of videomaking has evolved and adapted to accommodate to the constraints and affordances of the weblog publishing medium, I observed how my awareness of my audience and their opinions increased and I realized how producing and collecting video in this manner can be instructive in reflecting on your own ever evolving life.

Cinema Veritè and Bricolage

The form of moviemaking I most enjoy producing is documentary, with a particular preference for shooting using a cinema veritè style. This style, pioneered by Ricky Leacock and his colleagues at Drew Associates in the 1950's, follows a number of rules: no interviews, no tripod, no interfering, no asking to repeat an action. Instead of beginning with any particular idea, the story and final narrative of the movie only becomes apparent to the filmmakers over time. This approach to filmmaking resonates with the concept of bricolage as described by Seymour Papert, where the maker/programmer "is guided by the work as it proceeds rather than staying with a pre-established plan" [Papert 1991]. In producing movies for audiovisceral.net I began with some scraps of footage and no clear idea of what it was I really wanted to make. It became clear to me over time that one way to provide coherence but allow for great flexibility and experimentation was to choose or stumble upon a weekly theme and then create different interpretations of that theme as the week progressed. Publishing the videos in piecemeal fashion like this alleviated some of the pressures often felt by moviemakers when they feel like they have to make a big, bold statement with a polished, professional movie. Instead, I had the freedom

to experiment a little, invite feedback, try something else and finally finish up with a series of movies that show a progression in theme and style as the idea is explored and stretched.

Movies and the Weblog Format
Publishing the movies on the web provokes several considerations in terms of audience. Firstly, there is an increased possibility that the people that 'star', whether purposefully or accidentally, in your movies, will actually see the end results. In one case, I created a series of movies using footage of my friends, a process that involved an increased sense of responsibility towards how they would be represented, given that they would more than likely view and comment on the final movie on the weblog itself. Secondly, weblog software maintains fairly sophisticated statistics on visitors to your website, so you can identify where your audience comes from, what movies they seem to like the most and what movies and links they refer to others. This data can be used and understood as providing a vehicle for tracking the flow of ideas as the creative content on the website develops, evolves and spreads. Thirdly, and most significantly however, is the fact that your audience is able to provide feedback, suggestions and comments that are published as an accompaniment to the original work.

Constructionism has been described as being based on an idea that people learn by making, especially things that can be shared, shown, discussed, examined and admired. This sharing of artifacts and objects leads not only to the refinement of the creator's original idea but also to a deeper appreciation of how work is interpreted and a more comprehensive understanding of the making process. This "socialized reflection" as Jean Piaget would call it, is complex and multi-layered [Gruber et al 1977]. The suggestions and comments of others on audiovisceral.net have been thought provoking, ranging from expressions of enthusiasm for the overall idea of a video weblog, to critiques of specific cinematic tropes in certain movies, to proffered links and referrals to others creating similar works, to a poem written in response to the content of one movie. This input from my unseen audience helps me to rethink my own moviemaking process, to evaluate the effectiveness of my work and to understand the possibilities and potentialities of developing a tool for this community.

Jim Garrison points to the process of selective emphasis as defined by John Dewey, whereby we must learn to understand that situations are always more complex than the aspects to which we selectively attend [Garrison 2001]. I began my experiment with some preconceived notions of what I would like to do with a video weblog and what I thought it might become. The suggestions and comments I received from different individuals, some working in the same research domain and some just curious parties, have helped me rethink and reevaluate the type of tool I would ultimately like to develop. Barbara Rogoffs' community of learner's model informs my thinking, based as it is on the assumption that learning is a process of transforming participation in shared sociocultural endeavors [Rogoff 1994]. The roles undertaken by individuals in the group can change, be asymmetrical, and vary from one situation or one community to the next. In the context of the tool that I would like to develop, I would hope to encourage commentators to become producers and producers to see themselves as consumers and critics of the work of others. Creating a space where links and comparisons between works can be drawn up and discussed and where "movie threads" can develop, as one movie inspires another which in turn begets further interpretation, alludes to the model of a community of learner's as defined by Rogoff.

Sense of Place

Sense of Place was a series of short movies I made about people's favorite places; where they go to relax, to think, to wallow, to remember and to forget. I asked several of my friends in taped interviews to describe these places, and then I set out to try and record and represent the sentiments expressed. The first of these shoots was somewhat haphazard and resulted in large amounts of redundant and repetitive footage. Having reviewed the footage and compared it to the audio interview, I realized that one way to salvage the production would be to have the interviewee's narrative story drive the actual selection of images. I decided to bear this process in mind on the three subsequent shoots, a method that lent an overall coherence to the series. Edith Ackerman emphasizes the importance of being able to both dive in and step back when engaged in an activity, where the individual must be able to translate the learning experience into a description/model [Ackerman 1990]. In this instance, I began by launching straight into shooting, followed by a period of review and reflection on what I had captured which led to the development of an overall model for use with the remainder of the project.

In discussing the process by which children begin to experiment with the Turtle, Papert describes how "kids get right in there and even if they possess only one piece of fragmentary, incompletely specified qualitative knowledge, they can do something with it" [Papert 1980]. Learning to put order and meaning on what has been assembled and collected is an integral part of the editing process, and is a skill that emerges through trial and error, experimentation and the refinement and development of the moviemaker's strategy and approach. Ricky Leacock puts it simply as "you have to do it to get the idea". Knowing that the distribution framework allows for the display of incomplete fragments of movies that over time may or may not begin to coalesce into a larger more complete picture, helps the moviemaker dive right in, safe in the knowledge that maybe, just maybe, something will work out!

Conclusions

John Dewey writes in Experience and Education that "intuition precedes conception and goes deeper…reflection and rational elaboration spring from and make explicit a prior intuition" [Dewey 1938]. The video weblog experiment sprang from an originally ill-defined notion that an online diary format might be a good way to provide a framework and overall impetus for producing and publishing short movies. The entire audiovisceral experiment helped me to construct a better understanding of my own approach to the practice of moviemaking and storytelling. The time and energy it took to develop and maintain the website enabled me to closely examine my own assumptions about considering moviemaking as an integral and integrated part of everyday life. I developed several strategies for producing video content suitable for serial publication, a discovery that will hopefully help me create appropriate seed content and movie examples for the proposed video weblog tool. The comments and feedback I received from visitors to the site have helped me refine my ideas about the blogging community and pushed my thinking about video diaries in new directions. Audiovisceral.net continues to evolve and will remain a showcase for my ideas and experiments with video. I could continue writing more here about what I intend to do in the future, but instead I will leave you with a quote from the author J.M. Barrie who once wrote:

"The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another; and his humblest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it"

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