Technology Heirlooms

Exploring digital sentimentality through design research

With this project we were interested in studying two less explored areas of digital design:

Longevity: We wanted to understand the value of all our digital artefacts (virtual or physical) in the long term.

Legacy: We wanted to speculate on what might happen to all our digital content when we die.

Our goal with this work was the production of insights around sentimentality and persistence that might help inform the way we think about future product development directions.

research

Research #1 | Sentiment & Longevity

We know that people keep objects, particularly sentimental ones, for a long time. First we wanted to understand what they kept and why. We met people in their homes and had them talk about their sentimental things. We had them go in their basements and unpack boxes of things they couldn't bring themselves to part with.

Amongst the items we found a seemingly worthless **plastic gear** that was deeply sentimental; a **ladle from a Great Aunt**, hung from a stove and still used every day; and a **box of baby toys**, kept for the day when an adopted son might want them as a connection to his birth parents.

"Essentially any sentimental object has become sentimental because it has moved beyond being a mere object in isolation to being an object that embodies an association with some other entity." - from our research report.

(11 families; a mix of family structures, backgrounds and occupations; interviews with participants from age 5 to 70; home tours, un-boxings, in depth interviews recorded through photography, video and audio.)

Research #2 | Bereavement & Legacy

We know that many objects change hands when someone dies. We wanted to understand what role these objects played once this happened. We interviewed people who were recently bereaved and had them tell us about the objects they inherited, as well as the things they might pass on themselves.

We found **a diary with mundane but meaningful entries**; a sculpture that was being consciously left to **crumble in the rain**; and **a SIM card** kept in a wooden box, brought out annually in order to read the messages it contained.

"So many of the diaries just say things like 'Cleaned kitchen. Joy went to rehearsal all day. I did some gardening. Took a nap. ' ... just really dull, ordinary, everyday things [that] seem so boring, but now they're really important ...there's a whole social history of our lives in there." - from our research report.

(11 participants; loss of spouse, close family member, and/or close friend in past 1-6 years; age breakdown roughly 2 participants per generation (e.g. ages 20-60))

objects

Working design artefacts were produced as part of this process in order to encourage discussion with our research participants. Three of these are presented here.

We have used these three artefacts to discuss issues of longevity and legacy amongst ourselves, with our research participants and with product teams at our company.

Object #1:
Digital Slide Viewer

Families can use the Digital Slide Viewer to back up a deceased relative's Flickr account of digital photos. The photos are stored in a presentation case containing a viewer and digital "slides" which can be put on display in the home. Family members can then browse through this digital legacy, and use the device to reminisce and tell stories of their relative in the comfort of their house.
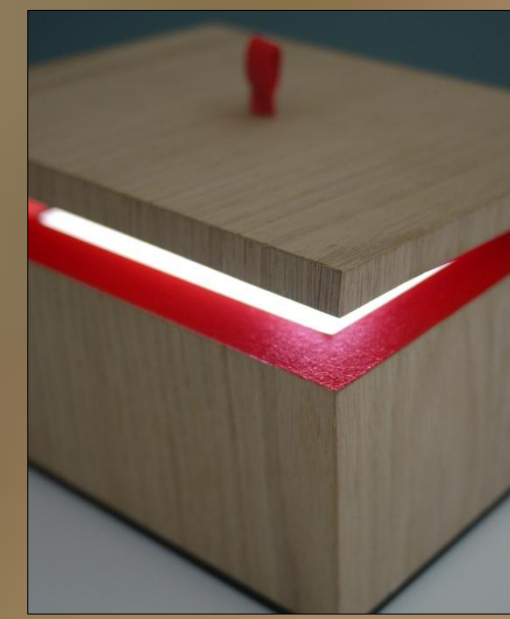
Object #2:
Backup Box

Backup Box is a digital store of a lifetime of Tweets posted to the micro-blogging site Twitter. It sits in the corner of a home, copying messages off the web, keeping them for a day in the future when they can be used to revisit the past. Backup Box is insurance for our memories. Even the most mundane of Tweets can become sentimental with time.

Object #3:
Timecard

Using Timecard, families can build a timeline that represents the life of a family member. The device encourages the telling of chronological stories of its subject. Its contents are crafted by a family, like a photo album, as a way of honouring others. Adding more content to it imbues it with more meaning. Perhaps it might become an object of heredity.

Digital Slide Viewer

Backup Box
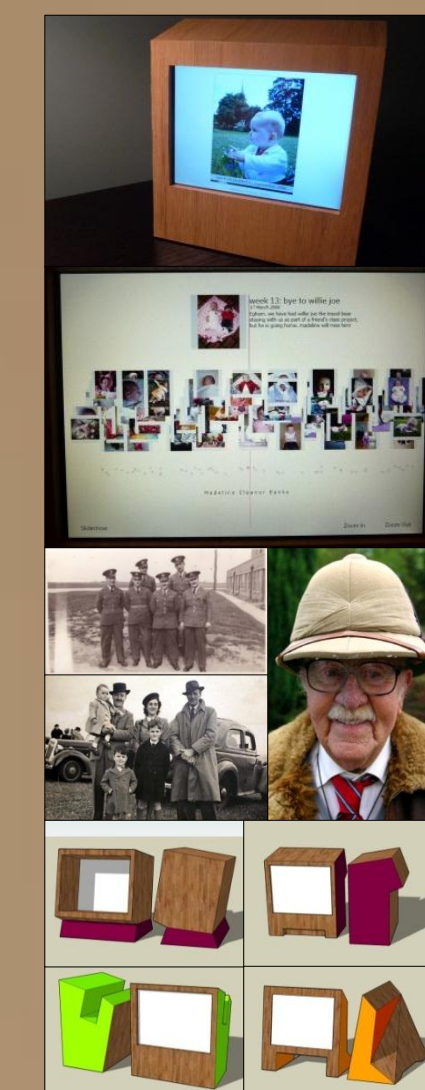
Timecard

learning

Our research and these three artefacts have helped highlight a broad number of issues. In addition, a deployment of four Timecard devices in the UK has given us a sense of them in use. Some of the issues we have learned more about include:

A lack of technological robustness. Most displays will not last 10 years, let alone the lifetimes that we describe. How do we build technology with more emphasis on longevity, perhaps at the expense of power?

Questions of service ownership. Thinking of online content as having long-term value helps us ask questions about our obligations to our customers in terms of persistence, as well as highlighting issues of ownership and access.

A change in value with time. Mundane content from the past can become deeply sentimental in the present. Strategies for cleaning out and deleting content in the short term may be a problem since its long-term value is unpredictable.

Timecard deployment video