Mnemosyne

Collaborative Scrapbooking in a Digital Environment

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http://dream.berkeley.edu/scrappy/
In the context of our Master’s project at the University of California, Berkeley, we explored the current physical scrapbooking process and the possibilities for changes and improvements in this process through the use of a digital system, called Mnemosyne.

Memory keeping has existed throughout the years in many forms. For example, there are family heirlooms, souvenirs such as a t-shirt or mug bought last summer at the Grand Canyon, scrapbooks, photo albums, travel diaries, and time capsules. The list is endless. People use these different forms of memory keeping to represent a variety of things: an event like a birthday party, a life stage through a baby book, or even a person who has marked them in a special way. Needless to say, memory keeping plays an important role in many people’s lives. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) explain that the tangible artifacts used in the memory keeping process express deep human needs for relationship and continuity.

In the Mnemosyne project we have decided to concentrate on one particular form of memory keeping: scrapbooking. Scrapbooks are the memory archive of the family. With the increased mobility of family and friends in today’s world, the ability to share important events and experiences has become more valuable. As described by Katriel and Farrell, in the traditional scrapbooking process, an individual sorts through a collection of items and decides which ones to include in the scrapbook. Then the items are loosely arranged and re-arranged on pages until the desired layout has been achieved. The items are then fixed in place and textual comments are added around them. The result of this process is a physical scrapbook, which can then be shared with family and friends or used as a personal reminder of the past.

Although other groups/companies such as Kodak or Snapfish have produced digital photo sharing systems, they have left out three essential features that we emphasize in Mnemosyne. First of all, our system offers collaborative authorship. Mnemosyne allows several users to work together in order to produce a single memory book (the system's term for an online scrapbook). Additionally, Mnemosyne offers a variety of types of conversational support. This support allows users in the system to communicate about memory books they are working on together and/or to share memory books with other people. Finally, people typically think of photos as the standard memory object, but there are many other important memory objects such as emails, diary entries, and postcards. Mnemosyne allows a wide variety of memory objects to be uploaded into the system.

In developing and using Mnemosyne, we have come to realize that there are two types of issues surrounding the system. First of all, there are the issues that would arise in any digital system of this type. We have explored these issues in the section entitled “Transition from a traditional to a digital scrapbooking process”. Secondly, there are the issues that are specific to Mnemosyne. These tend to originate from the collaborative nature of the system. They are discussed in the section entitled “The collaborative process”.

**Transition from a traditional to a digital scrapbooking process**

As mentioned above, a wide variety of memory objects can be uploaded, stored and used in Mnemosyne. For example, someone may have a collection of memory objects from a party, including a video, songs, digital photos, and recipes. Each of these items gains more value in the context of the other items thereby allowing users to create a comprehensive collection of memory objects that more fully reflects their memories.

Digital systems allow users to easily edit their memory books and reuse items from other memory books. In traditional scrapbooking, it is difficult, if not impossible, to change the
scrapbook once an item is glued into the book or text is written into the scrapbook. Furthermore, in traditional scrapbooks it is difficult to reuse items. If a scrapbook author wants to use a photo in multiple scrapbooks he or she has to make copies of the photo, which might involve ripping the photo out of a scrapbook or hunting down a negative to make a copy. Both copying and deleting items are standard features in a digital system.

In traditional scrapbooks, it is common to have the author of the scrapbook narrate the book to family or friends. This is still possible in Mnemosyne. Additionally, we have extended the narrative capabilities of the system by allowing written text in the form of comments and stories to be associated with memory books. Although it is not yet implemented, it is also easy to imagine that recorded narration could be associated with a memory book. This new form of narration (either textual or recorded) is important because it allows people who are separated geographically to view the memory book and read or listen to the associated narration. This communication over space allows friends and family to stay more involved in each other’s lives. In addition, it is possible to imagine that the author of a book may no longer be able narrate the book because he or she has passed away. Thus, the new forms of narration in Mnemosyne allow the author to communicate to friends and family over time.

Finally, let us consider the role of the instigator. Traditionally, a person is often inspired to make a scrapbook by a role model who has experience creating scrapbooks of his or her own. Typically, the inspired person does not make a scrapbook with his or her role model; rather he or she mimics the role model’s scrapbooking process (Katriel and Farrell). In our system, the instigator can actually work with the inspired person to make a memory book collaboratively. In addition, people who are invited to collaborate on a memory book can also invite other collaborators thereby acting as instigators themselves.

The collaborative process

In allowing people to invite collaborators, Mnemosyne introduces an entirely new process of scrapbooking by promoting collaborative authorship on a memory book. The online nature of the system allows collaborative groups to be geographically dispersed and to work together asynchronously. One issue that arises with collaborative authorship is that the individual working styles of group members may conflict. In Mnemosyne, we have chosen to allow social dynamics to resolve these conflicts, rather than impose technological restrictions. Given that the system is a tool specifically for sharing between people who already have established social relationships outside of the system, those social norms will shape their working styles within the system. To further these social dynamics within groups, Mnemosyne encourages communication between collaborators through various means including a message board and a chat feature.

Another issue related to collaborative authorship is that collaborators must have a certain level of trust in order to work together. Once again we have chosen to rely on social dynamics to define the rules of behaviour within the system. Mnemosyne gives equal rights to all collaborators, thereby assuming a high level of trust. For example, the system does not require approval from other collaborators on a memory book before inviting additional collaborators. This flexibility and reliance on social relationships is designed to allow users to set up their own rules for each of their groups.

Mnemosyne currently strives to give the users a great deal of technological flexibility with the goal of improving their creative experience. By changing the process of making a scrapbook
from an individual task into a collaborative one, a new kind of creativity is engendered, since eliciting input from others can develop one’s creative process (Farber and Green).

Typically scrapbooks are used as a form of self-promotion. People document their life histories from an autobiographical perspective in scrapbooks. Mnemosyne allows the user to create memory books alone or with others. One would expect to create a series of memory books over a lifetime - some personal and some collaborative. The total collection of these books more closely resembles a person’s life, by more accurately reflecting and documenting all of life’s events including those shared with others and those accomplished alone.

Finally, in creating collaborative memory books, people are not only documenting their lives’ events but also their lives’ relationships. Through the very process of creating these shared memories with friends and family, users can strengthen their relationships along with the memories themselves.

