DIGITAL DIALOGUES:
Technology, the hand, and narrative co-construction

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Panel Description

This panel explores a recent, community-scale collaboration and the transparent, digital storytelling forms that were designed to engage participants in the co-construction of its on site documentation and subsequent online dialogue. Our commentary centers on the studio-based symposium Digital Dialogues: Technology and The Hand. This four-day symposium emerged through a collaboration of the MIT Media Lab and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. The symposium was envisioned as a catalyst for bringing together the often-distinct communities of artists and researchers working expressively with digital technology, and craftspeople and artists working creatively with materials in an expanded contemporary crafts tradition.

Planned as a convergence and interplay of digital technology and material-based expression, an eclectic group of sixty people traveled to Maine to give form to these ideas through active dialogues focusing on technology and our contemporary conceptions of the hand. These dialogues included informal conversations and community activities as well as intensive studio-based experiences that built upon each participant's fluency with their particular medium. The introduction of select facets of digital technology expanded the activity of the typically material specific spaces on the Haystack campus into a series of hybrid studios

Explorations of haptic interfaces and tactile illusions were juxtaposed with the visceral experience of hand building clay forms in the clay studio. The pairing of a blacksmith and a researcher developing tools for natural forms of communication and linguistic expression in the digital realm manifested this notion of digital dialogues through a new collaborative work that embodied each of their perspectives. Other studio scenarios included micro-controllers and interactive sculpture, crocheted fiber mandalas and electro-luminescent wire, architectural scale prototypes of light-activated, kinetic installations, and handmade paper formed into books telling multimedia stories.

We would like to share our particular approaches to catalyzing and supporting collaboration and community authoring and the role of digital technology in this artistic process. Our perspectives include those of the co-concept developer and organizer of the studio-based symposium Digital Dialogues: Technology and The Hand and the developers of the story telling software tools, Tangible Viewpoints and the Digital Dialogues Video Weblog. The Digital Dialogues Symposium provided the setting for a series of experimental approaches to the recording and documenting of an event in space and time. Using custom designed software, participants collaboratively constructed their interpretations, reflections and impressions of the conference events, distributing them through interfaces that encouraged real-world discussion and supported continuing online dialogue. The transparency of these technologies has been essential for the involvement of, and dialogue within, a community that ranges from novice users of digital technology to skilled developers.

Panel Participants

Diane Willow organized this panel in collaboration with Aisling Kelliher and Ali Mazalek. Diane Willow is an artist and researcher in the Lifelong Kindergarten Group at the MIT Media Lab. She

developed the concept for the studio-based symposium Digital Dialogues: Technology and The Hand and organized it in collaboration with Haystack Mountain School of Crafts.

Aisling Kelliher and Ali Mazalek are research assistants and graduate students in the Interactive Cinema Group at the MIT Media Lab and the authors of the storymaking / storytelling software featured at the Digital Dialogues: Technology and The Hand symposium and in this panel presentation.

Aisling Kelliher designed the Digital Dialogues Video Weblog as an online compliment to the storytelling, dialogue and idea sharing experienced by the symposium participants during their time at Haystack. In the physical world, the mode of interactions of our conversations and discussions, informed by our prior experience, intuition and imagination, exist obviously and transparently. The level of abstraction is very different in the virtual world, so support structures must be built to enable and sustain these conversations and in so doing, allow multiple storytellers to coherently hear each other's voices while weaving tales and connecting the experiences of their online community. The Video Weblog provides an open, collaborative framework for reflection, interpretation and the sharing of media content using a casual, natural and manageable process. This process is supported by the development of a software tool for the manipulation and preparation of video content for swift online publishing.

Ali Mazalek designed Tangible Viewpoints as an interactive storytelling platform that uses physical objects and augmented surfaces to provide a direct mode of navigation to the story world. Using wireless and tag-sensing technologies, interactive narratives can make use of rich haptic interactions with physical objects, combining them with the power and flexibility of digital multimedia content processing and delivery. In the system that she designed for the symposium, a map of the Haystack campus provides a spatial framework for the different perspectives and story threads that emerged over the course of the event. Through human actions, conversations, and the creation of memories, physical spaces are transformed into social constructs and become the arena for story construction and narrative development. Tangible Viewpoints can re-create such narrative spaces in a tangible form, allowing audiences to collectively reflect upon and navigate through complex spatially structure and multi-viewpoint stories.

Diane Willow brought digital technologies into the mix of this unique, collaborative symposium. In the process, she introduced two non-traditional, community focused studios, Story Making and Printable, Shareable, Trinkets. As concept developer and organizer in collaboration with Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, she guided the design of this experience into one that emphasized both dimensions of this digital dialogue. She will reflect upon some of the meanings that participants have formed in response to this experience and explore the provocative nature of a context for leaning that juxtaposed the fluency of dexterous hands and agile computation in shaping objects, ideas, interactions and new ways of thinking.