

IdeaGarden : recursive documentation by composing photons, bits and atoms

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ABSTRACT

Creative activities such as brainstorming, discussions or even presentations in small groups are difficult to document and reflect in real-time. Many mediums are used to express and iterate ideas and concepts, ranging to physical sketches, objects and embodied demonstrations to digital artifacts such as computer based documents, networked resources and actors through mediated communication systems like videoconference and server based repositories and services, creating a complex hybrid ecology of services, devices and content. How then integrate all these items of such diverse nature? In this paper we describe the IdeaGarden system, an hybrid environment that allows users to capture, transform and share ideas by creating visual compositions blending photons, bits and atoms. The IdeaGarden uses wireless, at-hand cameras and video-projectors in order to capture and display concepts and ideas in physical and digital space in real-time so they can be not only archived but also modified, by successive compositions and re-compositions. We then examine how the IdeaGarden allows associative cognition, instant tagging and how this leads to the creation of an external collaborative memory shared by users during and after meetings.

Author Keywords

Computer Supported Collaborative Work, Creativity, Tangible User Interface, Documentation, Brainstorming, Hypertext.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Even though computer-based work constitutes a main part of today's occupation in work environment, a large majority of creative activities still happen in the physical world, in small groups in a conference room, often equipped with a



Fig1: IdeaGarden Setup

video-projector and a whiteboard. The configuration is often one speaker addressing an audience equipped with laptops, or many small groups working together and then gather to present their ideas to the group. In addition, people often attend these situations with notebooks, paper at hand, or other physical objects that allow them to externalize their ideas while documenting them. This diversity of practice is important because it allows a greater expressivity, every person using skills in which they are more comfortable or gifted to communicate their unique concepts and thoughts. Each person's style of communication and cognition is reflected in the tools used, usually mixing both physical and digital media.

However, the heterogeneous nature of these practices makes these tasks difficult to systematize in a shared computational environment. Moreover, going from digital to the physical world is usually an asynchronous and slow process, involving usually printing or sharing information after the fact. Therefore, we identify two main challenges for reflecting on creative activities in work environments such as presentations, brainstorming or meetings.

Documentation is tedious and often done after the fact (post-brainstorm, asynchronous), usually by one or two person, not by the group. Creative people use indeed many mediums and express their ideas very rapidly, it is

not easy to capture in real-time an enormous amount of information with traditional techniques such as note taking in a computer. In addition, how to describe a physical prototype or a sketch on a post-it note, not only this leads to ambiguous interpretations but also cuts the idea from its original locus and cognitive context in tasks usually led by free association or systematic exploration of a design space.

Only a few people are actively documenting, usually by taking some notes and taking some pictures after the fact that will be then share with the group by email or in a wiki, a blog. It is a challenge in small social activities where most of the time the audience is passive, listening to one person speaking. Moreover, it is important to distinguish how the reception of ideas (assimilation) is different from the actual understanding of them through sketching, note-taking, dialogue (accommodation). Being busy listening and re-enacting ideas, it is difficult for users to make sense of new concepts while documenting and sharing them.

In order to address these two challenges, we believe that we need new tools for presentation, documentation and sharing of ideas, in real-time and respecting the heterogeneous nature of creative production.

RELATED WORKS

Creative transformation of real-time information

More than mere calculator, the first computers were dreamt as machines that can accompany humans in their cognitive processes [1]. In the sixties, the head of IPTO (information processing techniques office) of ARPA hired J.C.R Licklider to extend to time sharing computers some research experimented in the SAGE project, a real-time, semi-automatic military distributed information system. In addition to propose a vision of the “intergalactic network”, he examined the role of computers in the future for cognition and collective creativity. He described notably in 1960 how computers might participate in formulative and real-time thinking [2]. Licklider vision focused on man and machine achieving a symbiotic relationship, where they cooperate and join their skills (decision-making, intuition vs automation, precision, repeatability). Moreover, after explaining how physical ideation is crucial (“Nowhere, to my knowledge, however, is there anything approaching the flexibility and convenience of the pencil and doodle pad or the chalk and blackboard used by men in technical discussion”), he described how desk-surface and computer-posted wall displays might help going towards this goal. However, Licklider visionary work was only a description of a system, it allowed him only to create and fund the research space needed to implement his ideas.

The NLS (oN-Line System) [3] created by Douglas C. Engelbart and his team at SRI (notably David Evans and Jeff Rulifson) was one of these first fully functional system for collocated and distributed articulation of ideas. The NLS itself is based on many original concepts developed by Englebart for he Air Force office of scientific research, motivated to fund his research after reading a report entitled “augmenting human intellect” [4]. In this long vision paper,

inspired by both J.C.R Licklider and Vannevar Bush [5] visions of the future, he describes how a creative professional (an architect in his example) might externalize his ideas to a computational system and not only document them, but also symbolically transform them, to better plan, organize and study his own artifacts. The NLS not only envision these possibilities but created actual software system to support “associative-linking” between a thought and a digital representation of an instance of it.

One of this was called Journal [6] and is maybe the first implementation of what would be called a wiki today, a real time concurrent versioning system. In this application, every information was recorded (as text) in its own context of creation (for later re-investigation) and assigned a unique identifier (called IDENT code) to be retrieve later but also instantly being linked with existing content in the system, leading each user towards the creation of what Engelbart named an “augmented knowledge workshop” [4]. Being in an environment of computer programmers, engineers and operational strategists, the Journal was operated through a programmable interface, based on text and algorithms. This powerful mechanism for logical thinkers was very efficient in the context of text based creative processes, but somehow far from the intuitive and serendipitous creative sketching abilities of an architect, as described in the vision few years before.

As a continuation of the works initiated at Engelbart’s ARC (Augmentation Research Center), many researchers, especially in the Silicon Valley, then started to address the challenge of incorporating non-textual information in real-time symbolic documentation system.

WhiteBoards documentation systems in CSCW, Ubiquitous environments

With the development of personal workstations and the relative availability of low cost projector-camera systems, many research groups created rooms with desks equipped with monitors and walls with whiteboards filmed by camera and for some with the possibility of video-projection. Xerox Parc pioneering works in augmenting groupware with integration of element from the real world initiated a long series of great projects like Colab [7], Digital Desk [8], Ariel [9], LiveBoard [10], VideoWhiteboard [11] and more recently BrightBoard [12], Collaborage [13] or ReBoard [14]. These systems propose many variation of how users can capture, segment and even re-project information from and to (augmented reality) the physical world in a digital context. In general though, also these systems use cameras (or actuated cameras), they are usually fixed and oblige the users to operate it from a specific location and in general with constraints kind of medium either dry-erase ink, paper or digital ink. In the context of creative process documentation, we think that an appropriate system should be able in theory to be content agnostic and allow user to digitize any kind of medium.

The CSCW (computer-supported cooperative work) and the telepresence/mediaspace research communities also provided many systems to capture creative informations by digitizing sketches, notes, from horizontal or vertical

surfaces . Ishii's TeamWorkstation [15], Clearboard [16] and later MetaDesk [17] tangible Interfaces allowed user to capture and manipulate information from the physical to the digital world. Environments like the iRoom [18] thought about the integration of multiple device into the system such as post-its, laptops, and allowed users of a space to gather the information created in space into a web server accessible by remote users (synchronous) or by users from the space at a later date (asynchronous).

These research projects explored in depth how to digitize and share information in a small group of users, however, many of these systems were not specifically designed to interact with global networks such as internet clouds or heterogenous networked information systems composed of machines and objects. With the ubiquitous development of the Web and later of fast internet connection leading to dense infrastructure for collaboration, many researchers later investigated how these collaborative systems could be structured from the beginning as an hybrid hyper-networks.

From Hypertext and the Web to the Cloud and networked information systems.

Based on the visionary concepts of pioneers like Ted Nelson Xanadu [19], many researchers started to create software-based hypertexts like Hypercard [20] in the eighties. Collaborative and non hierarchical environments such as hyper-structures are very relevant to creative activities where ideas are not necessarily expressed in a specific order or structure from the beginning. Later, the Mosaic [21] browser and the idea for the Web were based on researchers in hypertext started by Tim Berners-Lee during the same period during which networking personal content was a now possible through the widespread adoption of modems and lightweight networks.

Like David Evans and Doug Engelbart Journal application, Mosaic was first developed as a Read/Write system, allowing not only to display content but also to modify it on the spot, directly reconfiguring or iterating on a page from the client that will then update it to the server. This notion disappeared and was later revived in systems like wiki, however, few research systems allowed users to read and write content in a coupled manner on physical and digitally connected spaces.

More recently, many commercial systems like Evernote [22] or Flickr [23] allowed users to document their activities with mixed media, usually pictures, text or documents and more rarely integrate physical objects as digital hubs. The multiplication of tools to document activities is as big as the many ways each creative individual expresses himself ; leading to an ever-growing ecology of devices, interconnected through many APIs (advanced programming interface) integrating many streams of content together.

The new challenge here is to open these systems to be able to allow any arbitrary piece of information whether immaterial (ideas), artifacts (physical objects) and virtual elements in real-time, or as fast as possible, to try to fit into the cognitivo-motor loop.

IDEAGARDEN

Vision

The IdeaGarden uses the analogy of the cycle of water on earth to characterize how ideas circulate from brain to physical media and to digital environments back in the real world. Particles of water are emitted through the atmosphere, and are collected as clouds thanks to the action of photons, which energy allows cycles of condensation and evaporation necessary to the nucleation of h₂o molecules into diffused yet coagulated mass of suspend water. This metaphor also opens up the idea of sub-clouds, precursor and primary emission of water and insists of the presence of a light source and light receptor for the whole process. Similarly, we think that ideas can be represented in their many stages, in conceptual, physical and digital form, each manifesting a particular transformation in a complex and hybrid chain of people, media and devices, creating a creative transformation ecology that could be represented for example as in this diagram.

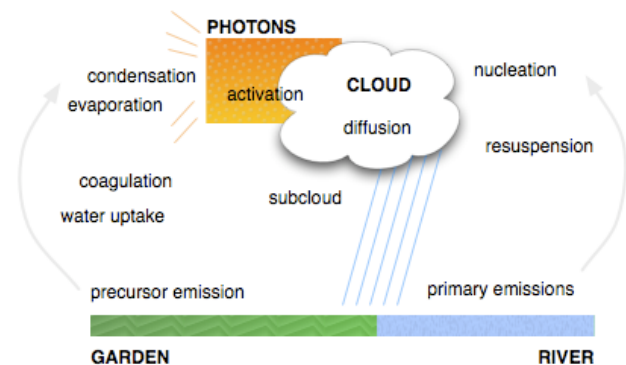


Fig 2: Water Analogy

We envision an augmented reality environment using mobile and fix cameras and projectors, computers and traditional paper, whiteboards, tables and other physical ideation media that could be seamlessly and intuitively linked by users. Although many previous research systems asked the users to specifically change their practices and use dedicated hybrid pens, interactive tables or whiteboard, we think on the contrary that they should express their ideas through the medium that best fit their expertise, message or context, not being constrained by the information system in the space they are collaborating in.

Our goal however is to integrate the transformation, documentation and collaboration features articulated in existing research systems with three main factors that we believe are key in order to allow collaborative cognition and focus on appropriate information: the composition of information through photons, the emphasis on speed for distributed cognition and the importance of hybrid and recursive collaborative practices.

Photons, Bits and Atoms

Most of the system presented in the literature focus generally on turning physical information into digital objects (automatic classification, indexing, meeting capture). Different methods can be used to capture creative

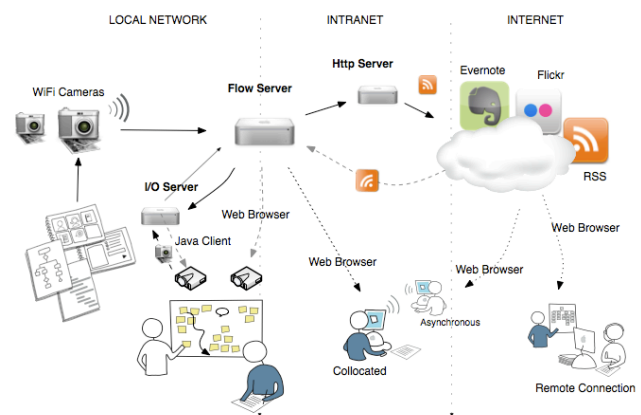
Video-camera based systems can address some of these issues (openness, less-constraints in terms of tools) but create massive data streams, hours of video of meetings, that need to be then annotated through tedious and repetitive video-editing. Some systems automatically tag information based on pattern recognition and classifiers which usually works pretty well for information that can be predicted but less good with creative artifacts, that usually resist predictive ontologies by nature. There is therefore a need for a-semiotic or pre-semiotic markers. Humans are very efficient to notice what is “interesting” or “remarkable” without necessarily knowing how to categorize things with a textual reference or a concept. For these reasons, we think that picture based documentation systems are the best suited to allow a fluid circulation between the physical world and connected online virtual storage and documentation systems.

Usually in Human-Computer Interaction, real-time interaction with computer, especially direct manipulation is possible when the sensorimotor loop, the maximum time between an input in the system (like moving the mouse) and an output (the cursor is moving on the screen) is inferior to approximatively 20 milliseconds. Similarly, we would like to introduce the notion of cognitivo-motor loop, i.e. the maximum amount of time in which an idea or a concept can be represented by a human-machine system. Like in interface design, if this amount of time is too long, it becomes very difficult to operate the environment (lag) or even impossible.

written note or an object. The more documentation awaits, the less chance it has to happen ever. Empirically we estimate as a start that the cognitivo-motor time span ranges from few seconds to few minutes maximum. Although this is not as fast as the sensorimotor loop, it uses the fact that ideas and concepts can be memorized and acted with a bit of delay, which is less true of action with information of the body (difference between remembering body state and mental states).

Douglas Engelbart's Bootstrapping concept popularized the notion of circular iterations for design, consisting in improving on a weekly basis not only the content created by users but also on the tools used to create. One area that was missing in his vision was linked to the recursive nature of physical space. We are interested in providing hybrid tools that can be reconfigured both physically and digitally by users of the space. For example, through the invention of a visual annotation scheme to be able to retrieve many iterations of a similar idea or concept both as a sketch in a notebook and as a digital document in the cloud.

System Description



The IdeaGarden system bridges physical and digital space through hybrid environments open to visual interfacing and indexation of content. Users capture pictures of sketches on notebooks and whiteboards, gestures, screen shots, physical objects or any object or people interacting with the physical space and which is in the visible spectrum. These pictures

are instantly sent through a wireless connection to the IdeaGarden Flow server that collects them and redistribute them as instances to a I/O server, connected to the physical space and media RSS server in the cloud, connected to internet services such as Flickr (Online photo service), Evernote (shared documentation service) or any service that provides an API (advanced programming interface) capable of interpreting XML streams.

The I/O server has access very rapidly (less than 10s on average) to the flow of pictures taken by the different users of the space. It allows them to re-project these pictures on different parts of the space like white boards, notebooks or the physical objects themselves creating accumulated layers of physical ink and photon-based pixels that we call a *composition*. For instance, a user takes a picture of a sketch located on his sketchbook, almost instantly, another user re-project it on a white board and starts to sketch on it using a dry erase marker, completing the sketch like in an exquisite corpse poem. Once finished, another user takes a picture of this composition of two sketch and can access it on its computer and annotate digitally on it, adding another composition on an existing one, creating a *recomposition*.

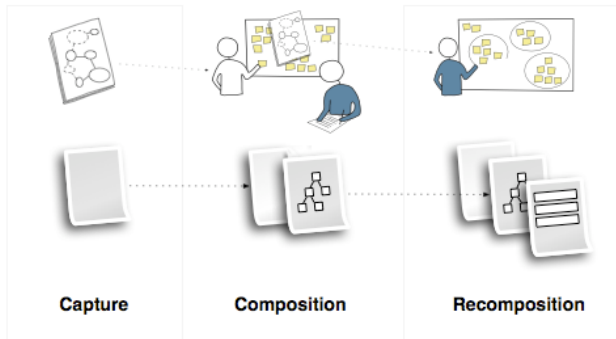


Fig 5: Compositions

The IdeaGarden also integrates textual metadata and images as metadata in order to tag selected documents as interesting or allow their further retrieval by users in a subsequent meeting or brainstorming. When pictures are in the cloud, users can add metadata and relevant contextual information to them which are then synchronized with the IdeaGarden server through callbacks to these services. Users can also tag physically their compositions using machine vision tags attached to physical objects that can be included into the picture taken for documentation. The same tags can be used for retrieval as well. The system integrates many sources of informations and make them available in both physical and digital space, sometimes creating hybrid documents mixing projected photons from pixels and reflected ones from ink or pencil traces on paper.

Documents	Free Association	Physical Objects
Digital PPT slides, Flickr, Google Doc, Evernote, Wiki screen - video projection from computer screen	Google Search results, web pages, Drawing software - screen image capture by a camera (as a photo)	Physical Sheets of papers, notebooks, flip charts, whiteboard, 3D objects, body (face, hand, gesture), found object

Technical Description

Hardware

The IdeaGarden system uses a set of wireless mobile and fixed wireless camera physically attached to the space, always ready to be used to document content or conversation happening in the space. The users can also use their mobile phone as camera by using specific applications that allow streaming of pictures over WiFi. It is very important that these cameras are “at hand”, accessible very rapidly by users to document an item, in the same way that they would access a pen to sketch an idea. They are then always on, and accessible from their physical case but also for the fixed one through a web application called Flow, where users can take pictures of things in the space by pressing a button on their browser. This function works also at a distance, allowing remote participants of a meeting to share the document process from afar.

The system uses many ultra short-throw video-projectors situated close to whiteboards, our main meeting table and on paperboards, covering more than half the total physical space. The I/O server is connected to these projectors and allow users to interact with captured content through a client integrating the stream of compositions, through a web app called Flow accessible on any Javascript enabled web browser (including mobile phones and tablets) and through more advanced yet classic HCI techniques such as multi-touch and gestural interaction on the whiteboard, pick-and-drop and mixed-reality manipulation (using AR-Toolkit) of pictures by using physical tags in front of whiteboards or laptop equipped with a camera.

Software

The IdeaGarden system is composed of three main software components: a routing server that manages how pictures, compositions and metadata are circulating throughout the space and the cloud, an I/O server that allow users to manipulate content in the physical space, in real-time, with resource intensive applications, and an HTTP server for asynchronous and remote interaction, that also manages back-up of content in the server farm of our lab. This three tier implementation allows to make a trade-off between near real-time feedback necessary for live composition of media and sharing asynchronously a synthetic memory of activities collected by the system for later reuse.

Another component of the system is a client application called Flow.app that let laptop users to display a triptych container filled with a cloud-based collaborative live editing tool on the left, a central piece with a private wiki such as the one of our lab, and on the right a MediaRSS stream of pictures taken in the space by the users. By drag-and-dropping pictures between panes, each users can create a little story bit in real time and select, tag or highlight a picture and put it in a sequence that explain a particular concept, idea or representation captured in seconds by the systems. For example, in a brainstorming, taking pictures of notes as they are sketched or presented by users to select the most promising ones, while also taking pictures of physical mock-ups and body gestures used by participants to explain such or such item.



In this picture above we see how this whiteboard wall displays (via Flow.app) on the left a picture taken from a sketch book on the table on top of which some sketches where added to complete the schematics. On the right, a local java application displays a picture of this composition that contains a the sketch, ink annotations and metadata added by people through their browser, in the room and also from a distance since there were remote participant to this brainstorming.

Three different techniques are used to add information to pictures: *highlight*, *tag*, *flag*. The first one relies on the counting of clicks on items in the stream of picture to differentiate some of the salient ones in a massive amount of visual documents that are generated by the system. Tagging is used to add semantic information to pictures for later retrieval or aggregation of meaning from the content. The last one, Flagging, consists in explicitly mark a picture with a social tag that correspond to a user or a social object such as a non-living networked physical entity (object, physical tag, or even a picture).

These different levels of marking the media generated by the system allows users to navigate through their collectively crafted memory from multiple dimensions and perspective. Having a million picture is almost like having none if there are no appropriate way to parse this massive

amount of documents into an appropriate level of meaning, reducing complexity to an operational synthesis. Like in multi-scale or zoomable user interface, the IdeaGarden proposes to its users to first access previously capture content from a simple narrative or few selected pictures and then unfold more through the rich structure of concepts and ideas that were in the context of these items when they were created.

CASE STUDY

We conducted an informal empirical study of the IdeaGarden system for 6 months, involving different creative teams ranging from 10 to 20 people using frequently the space in presence and also connecting to it from afar. On average we collected 500 pictures per month that were tagged, shared in the cloud and that circulated in the physical space. We isolated three specific activities that were remarkable and present here some insights we had by going through this reconstructed memory of the space.

Presentation

A typical activity consists in one or few persons presenting a document or a slideshow on the whiteboard and thinking aloud with seated participants in the room. In this context, we observed that people that use laptops and sketchbooks are very keen on providing information as a back channel (not to disturb the orator) and take picture either of screen (for related content, with URLs), items they sketch on the fly on their notebook and also participate in the highlighting and tagging of picture in the river of the IdeaGarden through the Flow.app client or directly through a web browser.

In this activity, the division of labour and the proximity of a physical camera on a table allow users for *discrete* interaction with the system and turn their passive, lurking attitude of patient listener into a subtly more active role of documentation of the presentation, creating together a stream of related concepts, ideas, that were trigger by particular topics discussed by the presenter. In addition, this situation proved to be ideal for composing short sequences of pictures, usually accompanied with small narratives that relates what is seen visually.

Brainstorming

In fast pace or deep-dive creative activities such as brainstorming or body-storming, there is usually not one leading person, the topology being more diversified and encouraging picking-up on the idea of other to continue them or make them more caricatural, extremes or reverse their meaning, parody them. By using fix and mobile cameras in the space, many users document the process as it unfolds (not after the fact as it is often the case) and can move easily content from one surface to the other to create compositions, mixed assembly of content drawn on sketchbooks, tables, or any appropriate medium. In this example for instance, a research paper is associated with hand-drawn sketches and physical tagging devices. This picture tells a simple story with mixed media, and might help to remember this concept for the next brainstorming. Note the cable of the physically attached to the table camera, always at hand and powered for rapid capture.

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