An Online Community to Discuss and Discover the Meanings of Things
Haruna Tada • CD 143 – Technologies of the Self • Tufts University
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Abstract The objects that we possess say much about ourselves, and form a large part of who we are. Often, we form initial opinions about people based on the things that they own, and discover much later whether or not the opinion was correct. Despite this vast amount of information that things can convey about ourselves, we rarely take the time to reflect on the things that surround us in our homes and in our daily lives, and when we do, it is done privately and not in an open discussion with others. In this paper, we propose a new online community to safely share and discover the meaning of things that are close to our lives, specifically the things in our homes. Through a combination of self-reflection and community discussions, members discover true meaning of things that are in their homes. Results from initial implementation of this technology via E-mail has proven interesting and valuable for the participants to discover what items are important in their homes, as well as to rethink what the word “important” means to them. Based on these findings, further study and evaluation methods are suggested.

Introduction
Imagine that your friend has asked you to accompany him to a party that is being held at his colleague’s house. You have never met the host before, but as soon as you walk into the home, you begin to develop a feeling for what type of person she is. As you walk down the hallway, numerous photos lining the walls tells you that she is an avid photographer. You enter the living room and the décor of the room shows that she values her Asian cultural background very much. From her CD collection on the shelf, you see that she likes classical music. Next to the shelf is a piano, from which you guess that she not only listens to classical music but also plays it. You then see a trophy from a music competition on the piano, and understand that she is in fact an experienced pianist. Next to the trophy are many old photos of people who seem to be her parents and relatives, from which you deduce that her family is very important to her. From the same photos, you also guess that she has two sisters and a young brother.

The scenario above, which is very typical for anyone who is being invited into a home for the first time, illustrates the importance of the roles that objects we keep around us play in defining who we are. This was the topic of discussion in The Meaning of Things [1], which argued that “to understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things.” We surround ourselves with objects that mean something to us – things that remind us of people, places, or events; things of personal accomplishments; things of value and status. Clearly, these items tell stories about you, from which strangers can learn a lot about you. It is not at all unusual for us to assess (not always correctly) the type of person someone is within five minutes of the initial encounter, based on clothes that they wear, the gadgets they have, or the car that they drive [2]. Yet, we rarely take the time to reflect back on our own possessions to think about what these objects really mean to ourselves and what it may means to others. Furthermore, when we do so, it is often in our own private space, and discussions with other individuals about value and meaning of possessions usually never occurs.
We propose to develop a virtual community where members can think about the meanings of objects in their homes by open discussions and sharing using images and descriptions. The focus on community is important, because interaction with other individuals within the community is an essential aspect of self-reflection [3]. Active discussions about the meaning of particular objects encourage members to constantly reflect on the values of the objects to themselves and to others. In order to communicate their ideas to other members, individuals are forced to clarify their thoughts and put them into words. In order to facilitate community discussions, we create a safe environment where members will not be criticized or personally attacked for the possessions that they own. The internet allows a virtual community of strangers to share things, through images and words, and discuss about their items of importance. Sharing the items of meanings to strangers who do not know you well is desired, because it forces one to be more descriptive and clear in explaining why something is important to you. Friends and family may not be as effective in this sense because they may know you well and deduce their own reasoning for what may be important to you. We focus on the items in the member’s homes based on the assumption that the home is where objects with most familiarity and meaning in one’s life are kept.

In this paper, we present the design of an online community that is intended to encourage users to reflect on the meaning of objects in their lives. This is done through the use of a game which involves discussion forums between the members. The design of the community, the technology, and the discussion format is described in the following sections. Some sample responses from users are presented, and methods for evaluation of the project are proposed.

**Overview of the Technology**

The motivation for the work is that there has not been a safe place for teenagers and young adults to discuss the meanings of things in their lives. We may think about what things mean to us in our private time, such as when we are packing to prepare for a move. However, there is a lack of community discussion in this area, and a safe environment to facilitate discussion is needed. Online implementation of the community is ideal, since it allows users to maintain anonymity and yet engage in interactive discussions.

The goal for the technology is to provide a safe environment for users to reflect on their material possessions and the meanings of the objects that they collect in their lives. A combination of self-reflection and community discussion is necessary for the members to understand what things are important to their lives. Therefore, the community of dedicated members is an essential part of the successful implementation this technology.

The participants, or *members*, are part of a closed *community*. The community is moderated by an *administrator*. The administrator begins by posting a question, or *topic*, to the community. An example of a topic is, “what are the three items in your home that you are most proud of?” The topic always asks for multiple items. A member can respond to this through an *entry*, consisting of photos of the objects and a description of why these items answer the question posted by the administrator. After members of the community get a chance to respond to the question, the entries are opened to the members for viewing and *discussion*. Throughout the discussion, members of the community vote for the item in the entry that they feel is of the greatest meaning to the owner. The goal of the activity is for the community and the owner of the entry to agree on what one item (of the three that were submitted) is the best answer to the question that was posted by the administrator. Once a consensus has been reached between the
community and the owner, the item is added to the owner’s homepage as part of a growing profile of objects. The homepage and the profile can be viewed by other members at any time. The aspects of the community and the game are discussed in greater details in the following sections.

Design of the Community

• The Community. The ideal design of the community is for the users to be within similar age group (i.e., high school to college age). Initially, young adults between high school to college age are recommended as members of the community. The size of a community should be kept to 20 or so; if the community becomes too large, there is a risk of an overwhelming number of discussion groups forming at some point in time. As mentioned earlier, it is desired that the members do not know each other, or even if they do, the choice of usernames protect the identity of a member.

• The Member. A new member of the community chooses a username and a password for gaining access to the community. Each member also gets a homepage that other members can view.

The only requirement to become a user is to have access to the internet from the home, and to be able to spend some time on the discussion forums on a regular basis. A user also needs to have access to a digital camera or a webcam that enables them to post digital photos of household items on the website.

Members will communicate to one another through discussion forums. There will be no person-to-person (private) communication in the community. This design is intended to keep the community from becoming a casual chat room.

• Member Homepage. The homepage initially contains his/her username, some self-descriptions that the member chooses to add, and one image or photo of the member. The self-descriptions and image can be customized by each member, as well as visual aspects of the homepage, such as background color, layout, and the title of the page.

The main component of the homepage is the profile, which is built up as the member participates in the community. Initially, the profile is empty for a new member. The goal for individual members in the game is to have a growing number of items in their profile that represent something meaningful in their lives.

• The Administrator. The responsibility of the administrator is to post new topics and questions for discussion, moderate discussions, and to maintain the population of the community by adding new members if necessary. The administrator must also monitor and steer forums to make sure that the users are having meaningful discussions. The role of the administrator as the initiator of a topic is very critical in the success of the technology; the questions must be designed carefully to provoke conversations and reflection about meaning of objects in members’ lives.

Design of the Game

• The Topic. The topic refers to the question that is posed to the members. The administrator is responsible for beginning new topics on a regular basis; however, members are encouraged to suggest new topics by contacting the administrator. The topic may be
accompanied by specific questions relating to the topic. Each topic has a deadline, before which the members can submit entries.

- **The Entry.** Members’ response to a topic is called an *entry*. Each entry consists of photos of the three *items*, title for each item, and descriptions of why the member chose that item, and answers to specific questions that were asked by the administrator. The entry is accessible only to the *owner* (the member who submitted the entry) and the administrator until the deadline for the topic has passed, after which the entry can be seen by all members. Entries can be modified by the owner before the deadline for the topic.

- **Discussion Forums.** Each entry, after the deadline, opens up for a discussion. The discussion is open for all members and administrator. The owner of the entry is anonymous – members of the community do not know who submitted the entry. This design is to ensure that the discussions do not become personal or offensive.

The purpose of the discussion is for the members and owners to discuss which of the three items in the entry best answers the topic’s question. The members, at any point during the discussion, can *vote* for the item on the list that holds the greatest meaning to the owner, as perceived from the descriptions. The members can change their vote at any time, as many times as they would like; however, only the most recent vote from each member is counted in the total tally. The owner can see the total votes of the members, and must continue the discussion until the owner agrees with the item chosen by the members. Once the owner and the community agrees on an item, then the owner can close the discussion, and the item that was ranked as the first item becomes part of the owner’s *profile* that is compiled in their *homepage*.

Some design features of the game are intentionally included to optimize the members’ opportunities for reflective thought process while participating in the community. First, each entry must be accompanied by the items’ photo. The photo is necessary not only for the other members to get a clear image of what the item is, but also because photographing the items will give the members an additional opportunity to reflect on its meaning and importance. The active gesture of walking up to the object and seeing it through a camera makes the user physically seek out the items of importance, and prevents him/her from answering the question based on memory of what they own in their homes.

Second, the deadline that are imposed on each topic, before which the members can submit their entries, lets individuals think about the question on their own before seeing other members’ responses. This ensures that the members’ answers to the questions come from them, and not biased by the answers from other members. The responses that are submitted are hidden to the community before the deadline, and owners may edit their own entry before that time as well. After the deadline, no other entries are accepted because they may be affected by other members’ responses.

Third, the owner of an entry remains anonymous during the discussion sessions, while other members’ names are revealed as they submit comments. This feature is intended to keep the discussion sessions from turning into personal attacks on the owner, while still holding other members accountable for the comments that they submit. This creates a safe environment in which members can share and discuss the meanings of their possessions. Also in the discussion forum, the total results of the votes for a particular entry are not revealed to members other than
the owner of the entry. This feature is to make sure that each member arrives at their own decision, unbiased by others’ votes.

The Experience

When a member logs onto the system, they begin at the Welcome page. The Welcome page is individualized for each member, and contains: 1) announcements that have been posted by the administrator, 2) a list of all discussion forums of which the member is the owner and links to the forums, 3) list of open topics to which the deadline has not yet arrived and links to the submission page, 4) a list of all topics which have ongoing discussion forums and a link to the topics, 5) links to other members’ homepages, and 6) links to maintenance tasks, such as viewing or editing their homepage and contacting the administrator. The navigation within the community is illustrated in Figure 1.

Discussion forum pages contain the original topic to which the entry was made (that is, the question that was posed by the administrator), the response (three items with title, photo, and descriptions for each), and the ongoing discussion relating to the entry. There is also a text box in the page for submitting new comments to the discussion forum. If the member is not an owner of the entry, then there is an option to submit a vote, ranking the items in order of importance. If the member is the owner, then the current rankings are shown on the page (other members do not see this), and there is an option to close the forum if the owner agrees with the members’ votes. When an owner decides to close a forum, the owner enters new description for the highest ranked item in the entry, and the item is added to the owner’s profile in the homepage.

Preliminary Results

The effectiveness of the technology was tested on nine young adults via Email. Participants varied in age from 19 to 24, and consisted of four males and five females. The participants included two college undergraduates, three college graduate students, and four young
professionals. All communications were done through E-mail over a period of two days, and no photos were exchanged due to limitations in availability of the equipment. The names of the participants have been changed for this paper.

There are several important differences between the implementation of this trial and the actual design of the community that must be pointed out. Ideally, the community should be composed of members who do not know each other in real life (even if they do, they shall not be recognized because each member chooses his/her own username). Furthermore, an important safety feature of the community was that the owners of entries remain anonymous to other members. In the test group, however, most of the members knew each other, and because communications were done through E-mail, the owners of the entries were automatically identified. Another important distinction was that participants were not required to take photos of their objects, and many of the participants were not at their homes when the question was asked. Due to these reasons, most of the participants did not look around their home to seek out their items of importance, but instead recalled them from their memory of what they own in their homes.

The question used for the trial group was: “What are the three items in your home that are most important to you?” After receiving a response from the participants, the responses were compiled into one E-mail and sent to the members again to initiate the discussion. The participants did not see other replies before responding to the question.

One example of the interaction that occurred is shown Figure 2. Note, messages have been edited to remove parts of the E-mails that do not relate to the particular response. In the excerpt, “owner” refers to the participant that submitted this response. In this example, the owner’s three important items are: a) chef’s knife, b) laptop – which is used not as a computer but as a stereo, and c) photo album. From the initial description of the items, prior to discussion with other participants, the owner’s reasons for choosing these items is perceived as being things that give the owner enjoyment – cooking, listening to music and singing, and photographing. They represent three different hobbies that the owner has, and it is difficult to say which is more important than the other. As the discussion progresses, the meaning of importance evolves from items that bring enjoyment to things that cannot be replaced. Unfortunately, the process of choosing the most meaningful item was not completed in this case due to time limitations.

Follow-up questions were asked to all participants, surveying the thought process that lead them to their choice of the most important item in their homes. Questions asked were: 1) describe the thought process that lead you to your choices of important items; 2) how did you define “important,” and 3) did your idea of “important items” change during the discussions? Of the nine participants, six replied to the follow-up survey, and another had included these in her initial response.

The selection process for what is important first began, for many participants, by defining what was meant by the word “important.” This was the subject of the second question. The responses to the second question varied, and included things that trigger fond memories, things that help express independence, things of monetary value, and things that are used frequently. These definitions tell us a lot about individuals, and they make people think about what type of values – practical, monetary, sentimental, etc – are the most important to them. After deciding on the meaning of “important,” participants chose the items of importance. For example, one participant, who defined importance as “items that help me do things that I enjoy,” recalled the activities that he enjoys doing at home, and chose items that allow him to do these activities,
such as sports equipments. Another participant, who defined importance as “items that I use frequently and will cause great inconvenience if I don’t have it,” recalled his daily activities and the tools that he uses in the course of the day, and chose refrigerator, computer, and telephone as important items.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic:</th>
<th>What are the three items in your home that are most important to you?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response:</td>
<td><strong>My Chef’s Knife</strong> – I love to cook, and it’s what I do when I’m in a bad mood, or need to relax, or need to cheer up. I bought this knife years ago and have been using it exclusively ever since, and it feels perfect for my hand. I can’t use any other knife quite as well as I handle this one.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Laptop** (which is basically a stereo) – This is a fairly old and not-so-powerful laptop, but it’s very important to me not because it’s a computer, but because it’s essentially my stereo. I need music in my life, and anytime I’m alone in my home, I have the music on and I’m singing along to it. I also have a vast collection of mp3’s on my laptop that I don’t have copies of.

**Photo album** – I love taking pictures, and my photo album collection is a way for me to keep track of them. They contain numerous pictures of my family, friends, and places that I have visited. They are a part of my past, and they are irreplaceable.

| Discussion: | Anne: If you were in a really bad mood, would you rather listen to music and sing, or cook? |
| Owner: | I’d cook while listening to music and singing, all at the same time. |
| Judy: | I think your knife is probably the least important of the three, because it’s at least some-what replaceable as opposed to your music collection or your photos…? |
| John: | I agree with Judy about the knife. How much different can one knife be from another? |
| Owner: | It does make a difference to me; cooking with a bad knife is a really frustrating experience. But I guess you’re right; it’s not as difficult to find another good knife than to replace my photo albums and my music collection. |
| Carrie: | How often do you look through your photo albums? Mine usually just sit on the shelf and I never look at it unless someone pulls it out. And do you use your computer for anything other than listening to music? |
| Owner: | I probably look at them at least a few times every month, or whenever I’m adding new pictures. Once in a while I use my computer for work – typing, etc – but I rarely do work at home, so that function of my computer won’t be missed at all even if I lose my computer. |

Some participants’ definition of “important” changed, or evolved, during the discussions. For example, the owner of the discussion presented in Figure 2 responded to third question of the survey by saying that: “Initially, important things just meant things that I enjoy and is a big part of my life. In the process of choosing one item, as opposed to three, I had to ‘rank’ the three important things by some other means. The fact that one was replaceable and two were not made that item a little less important than the other two.” This response indicates that the participant did not necessarily change her mind during the discussion, but rather added another layer of criteria by which she chooses her important items.

On an important note, some of the participants have sent me casual Emails after the initial posing of the question, prior to sending their response. In these letters, some of the participants
have specifically expressed difficulties in deciding what was important to them. One participant said, “this is making me really think about the stuff own.” Another have said, “I can think of lots of stuff that are important, but give me some time to pick three.” These comments are indications that this trial did, in fact, make the participants reflect on their possessions and assess the meanings, even prior to discussion with other members. The discussion in the community will likely enhance their understanding process and lead to further re-assessment of the meaning of their belongings.

An important lesson from this initial study, which was not foreseen before the trial, is that the question statement may be understood differently by different members. This ambiguity in the question statement was intentional in the trial case, and it allowed the users to reflect not only on the meaning of their belongings, but also the meaning of the word “important.” In the actual implementation of the project, the administrator may choose to keep this ambiguity, or may eliminate the ambiguity by asking more specific question so that all respondents agree on the meaning of the question.

**Evaluation**

This technology may be evaluated by a small-scale implementation using existing on-line technology. To aid the evaluation of the technology, all communications occurring in discussion boards will be recorded on the server. The communications, specifically the discussions that go on between the owner of an item and the other members, is very important in assessing the level of reflection that is taking place during these activities.

Surveys or interviews, both before and after participation in the community, should be employed to assess the effectiveness in which it made people reflect on meanings of things in their lives. Some suggested questions for evaluation is listed in Figure 3. The pre-session questions are intended to determine the amount of time and thought that individuals put towards understanding the meaning of their possessions. The questions are also designed to get individuals to start thinking about things in their homes and their meanings.

### Questions for pre-session survey or interview

- Describe the last time that you thought about the personal value of something that you have in your home. Why did you think about it?
- What are some characteristics of things that make them valuable to you?
- Look around your home. What would a stranger walking into your home learn about you from the things that you keep?

### Questions for post-session survey or interview

- Describe your thought process while you chose the three items that held some specific meaning to you. What criteria did you use to choose the items?
- In what ways did the discussion with other participants help you understand better what things held meanings for to you?
- In what way does understanding the meaning of your possessions help you learn about yourself?
- How did seeing other people’s meaningful possessions help you understand yourself or the owners of the items?
- What comments made by other participants influenced your choice of meaningful items?

Figure 3. Sample questions for pre- and post-session assessments
The post-session survey will focus on the experience that people had in the community and how, if at all, it has changed the way that they think about objects. They also ask about how learning about things has affected their knowledge about themselves. In addition to these post-session questions, the pre-session questions may also be repeated at the post-session interview.

After successful implementation of the technology with young adults using things from the home, the community can easily be opened up to other potential user groups. Furthermore, topics of discussion may be expanded from things in the home to other things in the people’s lives. It may also be interesting in the future to allow members to start their own topics, much like it was done in the Turing Game [4].

Conclusion

Our homes are filled with things that we have collected over time. Very often, people walking into our homes can instantly get a feel for our hobbies, lifestyles, and even personalities based on what we keep around us. Despite this vast information that things can convey about ourselves, we rarely step back and take the time to think about what the things mean to us, and why we want to keep them close.

A new online community was proposed to facilitate the discussion of the meanings of things. The goal for the project is to provide a safe environment in which young adults can share and discuss, through images and words, items of meanings in their homes. An administrator chooses a topic (for example, “What are three things in your home that are most important to you?”) to which members respond through an entry containing images and descriptions of items. After members get a chance to respond, discussion forums are opened for each entry that was made. Through the discussion forums, the community and the items’ owner must agree on which one item is the most meaningful. After a consensus is reached, the owner can add the item to their personal profile, which is kept in a homepage that other members have access to. Through participation in the community, the members build a collection of items in their homepages that hold special meaning to them.

Initial testing of the concept with a small trial group has shown that the activity has made the participants reflect on what possessions in their homes are important to them. The self-reflection and assessment process began when first choosing three items of importance, and continued during discussions with other participants. It has also shown that the question of “what are the three most important items in your home,” although seemingly simple, lead to different definitions of “important” for each participant. These ambiguities add a layer of complexity to the exercise, and make the participants reflect not only on what objects are important to them, but also on what “important” means to them. The trial was done using a group of participants that did not strictly follow the ideal design of the community for this program. A further trial is suggested, following more closely the design features of the community and the discussion forums, to study the degree of self-reflection that goes on in the participants. It is also desired that, through the understanding of the meaning of things in their lives, participants get a deeper understanding of self.
References


