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Flashback DC iPhone App Prototype

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Photography in the Mobile World

Almost two centuries ago, on August 19, 1839, photography was first presented to the world. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787 – 1851) was credited for this invention, although the history of the development of photography was not actually so straightforward (Marien 3). I consider today's media saturated culture, where photography plays a key role in so many aspects of our every day interactions, and I wonder if Daguerre or those living in the 1830s could have ever predicted photography's evolution into such an easily accessible and widely popular pastime and tool. The integration of the digital camera in the mobile phone that began in 2000 has enabled each and every one of us to be an amateur photographer, always at the ready to capture another shot. In the case of the iPhone, the integrated camera is inseparable from the phone's smart technology, and this marriage opens up an entire world of possibilities, where the user becomes photographer and photo-editor, amongst other roles. The iPhone has led to the rise of apps that transform a basic camera and have significantly mediated "different practices in making and consuming images" (Chesher 9, 11). In this paper, I explore the effects of these elements on the conceptualization and prototyping of an iPhone app, Flashback DC.

Long ago, before photography, painters undertook the task of creating realistic (and sometimes, unrealistic) depictions of places, people, and everyday scenes. The advent of the film camera placed the camera in the context of the home, giving more people access to photography. Early themes of the 'Kodak culture' of the early 1900s included the home, children, tourism, photographic art and journalistic reportage. Photography was often limited to special occasions, places, or documenting family affairs. The 1948 introduction of the Polaroid Corporation's instant photo processing camera made photography more accessible to the average person by removing the intermediate darkroom step between photographing and receiving prints. For the first time, individuals had the gratification of viewing their images almost instantly. The first digital camera was released in the 1990s and its technology greatly contributed to the rise of photography. (Chesher 7–8). Some of the reasons for this popularity were that, unlike film photography, digital photography is "far less expensive than traditional film and print, it eliminates the expense of

wasted shots, and requires no input from external “photo experts” to achieve the final image. This frees the photographer” (Lee 267).

Author, Dong-Hoo Lee puts forth that “Digital cameras [are] an intimate mobile medium [that allows] people to readily visualize every moment of their experience” (Lee 267). The iPhone camera takes this to another level, as it can “perform real-time digital transformations, translations and transmissions on mobile amateur images.... In a minor way, it enters the realms of media production, information and deixis (it carries information about person, direction, time etc. with its images).” Within this digital realm, “photographs can be used to enhance people’s shared experience in the photo-taking moment.” These are just some of the advantages that helped the iPhone to top the “most popular cameras” list on Flickr, within just four years of being released. (Chesher 11, Lee 268).

It is important to note that the mobility and immediacy digital (including iPhone) photography have not only increased the popularity of photography but transformed its subject matter, as no longer is it limited to special occasions or moments. In a 2010 study conducted on “Digital Cameras, Personal Photography and the Reconfiguration of Spatial Experiences,” it was found that “Handy digital cameras can easily transform daily life into pseudotouring experiences” where individuals collect images to later (or immediately, via social networking or mobile blogs) tell their stories. The subject matter of photography has today expanded “to include mundane and ephemeral images...turning ordinary scenes or banal moments into something noticeable, and thus something recordable” as well as photos that capture “affective moments and [...] express feelings” (Lee 270-271).

It is undeniable that the rise in creative mobile apps that use the camera in ways other than merely snapping a basic shot has also played an immense role in popularizing iPhone photography. As of 2012, two of the most popular and successful camera apps were Hipstamatic and Instagram. Interestingly enough, both these apps share the main function of “simulating the nostalgic image”, perhaps in response to the near complete shift in today’s world to digital from film photography. It would appear that although the digital medium has overtaken film, there is still

fascination with the nostalgic and making photos look vintage. These apps evoke nostalgia by mimicking the way physical photographic prints can be manipulated in the darkroom or naturally break down over time. Flashback DC draws on this trend of nostalgia, which is considered “other-worldliness or coolness” in the digital realm (Chesher 12). Not only does the app allow you to apply a vintage effect to your photographs, it actually displays vintage photos of a specific location throughout history. This proves to be especially interesting as the older photographs represent the history of the locale as well as the history of photography, as it is sometimes evident that images were captured with different photo technologies based on their date.

In order to present these vintage images, Flashback DC makes use of the iPhone capability of enabling apps to be used “as a data input device, collecting information instead of making conventional photos”. The technology that currently does this best on the mobile platform is *Google Goggles*, which “uses images as a visual form of search query.” The user simply snaps an image, and the camera “transmits the image information to a Google server to match it against a huge image database” in order to present image query results. The technology is currently limited to interpreting text, logo, landmark, book, music, celebrity, product, movie and barcodes, as these images are easily identifiable by their unique visual modalities (Chesher 14).

Flashback DC uses this technology to focus specifically on DC landmarks. What makes this so ideal is that “Traditional snapshots have usually been taken at special places and occasions such as well-known tourist sites and photogenic landmarks for the commemoration of their “having been there”. Additionally, the images of tourist places that are projected by “mass media and tour marketers, shape people’s perception and photo-taking practices at the tourist sites, and those photos of tourist icons in turn, become another form of image projection that perpetuates the iconic images of the places.” (Lee 268, 271) For these reasons, landmark photos tend to share very similar compositions over time, increasing the accuracy of image recognition in the scope of this app. The image query results in this app, presented as a photographic timeline, serve to enhance a user’s interaction with the physical space they are in, by helping them to better understand the history of their current location. The desired result of educating the user is

to also create a connection for the user between the rich history of downtown DC, and their present moment.

Researcher, Nancy A. Van House has put forth that personal photography can be categorised into four social uses: “personal and group memory, relationship creating and maintenance, self-representation and self-expression”, and notes that “these categories are overlapping (130). Flashback DC centres primarily around memory, and focuses on the user’s ability to explore and record images as “slice[s] of space and time.” (Lee 269) This app has the added bonus of serving as a miniature scrapbook of a DC trip, and, thus, archives and organises your photos of such a trip for you.

In conclusion, photography has certainly evolved tremendously since its invention in the 1800s. Digital, and especially mobile technology, has made it possible for anyone to be a photographer. Photography fulfils the human desire to capture and reminisce on life’s moments; both big and small. The human preoccupation with nostalgia has popularized not just digital photography, but the use of iPhone apps that recreate the vintage effects of physical photos that have been lost with the shift to digital. In the context of iPhone apps, technological advancements have made it so that photography is no longer limited to the mere capturing of photos. Apps such as the conceptual Flashback DC use the camera as a tool to search through information about history, and educate the user. The mobile world is truly transforming photography, and, like Daguerre, I cannot imagine what the next two centuries hold for the medium.

Works Cited

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