Knitting Scarves and Stories Together

by Daniela Rosner & Kimiko Ryokai
My younger sister recently gave me a scarf she had been knitting over several years. She created it using a difficult stitch, but there is more to the scarf’s story than just that. It had accompanied my sister when she traveled to Berlin and when she visited me here in California. For my sister, the journey of the scarf is emotionally intertwined with the object itself. Now when I wear the scarf, I want to know about the times she spent learning, developing, and recalling her crafting skills. I want a glimpse of the places she went to and the people she saw while knitting.

What if I could access the stories entangled in the making of this artifact? Does the augmentation of a traditional handcraft undermine its preservation? How can we, as designers, create tools that both maintain and extend people’s existing creative practices?

The Story of Spyn

Spyn is a system for knitters to record, recall, and share information surrounding the process of handcraft. The project developed out of an interest in enhancing the narrative nature of craft. Handcraft has been tied to storytelling for some time. Wives of wartime soldiers recorded images of bible stories and legends with colorful quilted fabrics; knitters in Peru use particular patterns to encode the village from which they came. Even our vocabulary reflects this connection: the word “thread” may connote a subplot in a piece of writing; to “spin a yarn” (the inspiration for Spyn’s name) means to tell a story. Spyn supports and extends the ways that handcrafted artifacts convey the process of their creation by digitally capturing and recalling the stories of the artifact’s creator.

The Spyn system is comprised of an Asus Ultra Mobile PC (UMPC), an infrared (IR) enabled Logitech Camera, a GPS sensor, a rotary encoder, and knitting yarn printed with IR ink patterns. The Spyn yarn enables the system to identify locations on the knit fabric (using the IR-enabled camera) so it can correlate stored digital media with different parts of the artifact. The system provides knitters with easy access to the recording of digital audio and video through the UMPC interface. When a person later photographs the knit using Spyn, the system displays the locations in the image of the knit that have stories associated with them. Users can then use the UMPC interface to listen or watch the media corresponding to those locations.

As the designers of Spyn, we are eager to uncover the social activities that emerge when knitters use the system. So far, we have observed knitters use our first prototype to preserve the significance of their craftwork, reflect on their environment, and tell stories.

Knitters’ Stories

One knitter used Spyn to capture the meaning of a symbol she embedded in a shawl for her granddaughter. The symbol, she explained, preserves the sanctity of her granddaughter’s marriage and new home. She used Spyn to share this special meaning with her granddaughter and generations to come.

Another knitter used Spyn while creating a scarf for her brother to intermittently record a recipe for sugar cookies. She wanted to connect two different notions of comfort: knitting a scarf and baking comfort foods. She would put down her knitting to photograph her cookies while recording her narration of the baking process.

Over the next few months, we plan to work closely with knitters to further explore how they use and interpret stories virtually embedded in materials knit with Spyn and how these stories unfold over time.

How to Spyn:

- Knit with yarn printed with IR ink.
- Photograph a part of the knit with Spyn’s camera.
- Record a story to associate with that section (Spyn’s UMPC can capture audio and video).
- Travel with knit (Spyn records GPS location).

How to Recall Stories Captured with Spyn:

- Photograph a part of the knit with Spyn’s camera.
- When the image of knit appears on the UMPC screen, select one of the highlighted areas.
- Listen to the audio or watch the video associated with that area of the knit.

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