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Media trajectories in large-scale live events

Raphael Velt
University of Nottingham, School of Computer Science
Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB
psxrv@nottingham.ac.uk

Large-scale live events, such as marathons and music festivals, involve a large number of participants with a variety of roles, motivations and levels of engagement, as well as a variety of media, from user-generated content to national media. We interviewed runners and spectators in marathons to understand this category of experiences and derive design guidelines. A first analysis of this data, combined with the trajectories framework, shows potential for designing tools supporting retelling the story of these events.

Trajectories, Media, Transmedia, User Experience, Marathon, Spectator, Souvenirs, Live events, Storytelling, Sports, Large-scale events

1. INTRODUCTION

Works analysing interactions within complex cultural phenomena have led to the construction of a conceptual framework in which the experience of participants is considered as a set of coherent journeys, or trajectories (Benford et al., 2009). Three types of trajectories have been highlighted by these works: canonical trajectories (how the journey that participants experience has been planned), participant trajectories (how they have effectively been carried out) and historic trajectories (how they are retold).

Trajectories have been studied in the context of performance art, and more recently, of museum interpretation (Fosh et al., 2013). The purpose of my PhD project is to apply this framework to the study of how people interact with media in general and television in particular, as my research will be co-hosted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). This class of experiences appears to be a good candidate to apply trajectories, with examples of interactions spanning across heterogeneous media including an increased exposure to a diversity of news sources or even narrative forms that have been described as “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins, 2003). These interactions often include participatory mechanisms, in which viewers may assume the roles of recommending, distributing or even producing contents.

Because of how media use is interwoven in our everyday lives, it is essential for me to capture the context in which these interactions take place, to study them “in the wild” (Rogers, 2011) and to understand how they combine to make meaningful experiences (McCarthy & Wright, 2004).

2. RESEARCH PLAN

The initial research plan for my PhD is to start by choosing a set of contexts to focus my research, then organising studies in which I should be able to retrace different trajectories that unfold within these settings. The first such study is underway at the time of writing. The results of these studies will be used to find out the elements of experience that can be used to design technologies that support trajectories. Another outcome of these studies will be to refine the trajectories framework in the context of these experiences.

Prototypes will be designed based on these findings and used in trials whose result will feed back into understanding trajectories, resulting in an iterative process that will borrow methods and concepts from Action Research (Hayes, 2011).

Defining a setting in which to study media trajectories requires narrowing down a number of dimensions, including time scales, places, social context, “media” in the sense of technologies and devices, “media” as outlets, from institutions to individual producers, units and types (or genres) of contents, roles involved, from production to consumption through distribution and curation.

For the first part of my research, I have decided to focus on large-scale live events, and specifically on distance-running events where there’s a diversity of trajectories corresponding to a range of roles (spectators and runners, professional, amateurs and volunteers for charities) and of media (social media, independent photographers, national press coverage).

3. RELATED WORK

All roles involved in distance running event have been the subject of HCI works. On the running side, ethnographic studies have looked at the social aspects of running (Collinson, 2008) and commercial applications (such as Runkeeper, MapMyRun, Strava, etc.) and research prototypes (Gil-Castiñera et al., 2011) have been designed to support this practice. Another aspect that has been explored is the tracking, collection and sharing of running data and its representation (Rooksby et al., 2014).

On the spectator side, studies have led to understand the activity of watching sports (Jacucci et al., 2007) and design tools to support it (Esbjörnsson et al., 2006), and have modelled it along the characteristics of the sport itself, of the event and of its social aspects (Ludvigsen & Veerasawmy, 2010).

Other relevant works include studies of how photos can be used to tell stories (Van House, 2009), design guidelines to foster these activities (Ames et al., 2010) and trials of services that integrate the activities of taking pictures and generating souvenirs (Durrant et al., 2011).

Outside HCI, sociologists of health have studied the complex interweaving of amateur, professional and charitable running and its representation in media (Nettleton & Hardey, 2006).

4. MARATHON INTERVIEW STUDY

The first study in my research was an interview study, whose purpose is to identify the trajectories of runners and in distance-running events and to understand how different technologies are used to support these trajectories.

The first participants to be recruited were runners that had participated in a previous study that took place at a half-marathon. Snowball sampling helped recruit a spectator that had come to a race to watch another participant, and friends and colleagues also participated in the study. Two committee members of a running club were also contacted, for a total of 12 participants.

5. FIRST FINDINGS

5.1 A diversity of profiles

Amongst these participants, seven were primarily recruited as runners, three as spectators, as well as two that described their experience of organising races and communicating around these. The interviews showed that there is overlap between these categories and three participants talked of their experience both as runners and spectators.

More runners have also reported having watched races on TV.

The motivations were varied and included, for runners, health and fitness, challenge and performance, fun, being part of an event, fundraising and socialising. Spectators were there to see a friend or relative, because of a passion for photography or for the atmosphere of the event.

Charities play an important role in British running and five runners reported raising funds, whereas the club committee members worked closely with a charity when organising a series of races.

5.2 Canonical trajectories

The canonical trajectory for a runner is easy to identify, both from interviews and the websites of race organisers or charities and starts with registering, training, optionally raising funds at the same time, then when at the race, following signposting to get to the starting points, then to the end, where they get a medal. After they come home, runners receive a link to visit a website that sells pictures of them running.

Training is often supported by downloading training plans and/or using mobile applications. Runners also plan to race at a specific pace, which may be kept either using a watch or by following “pace runners”.

One participant had plans on a longer term and was wishing to enter a number of races over two years to raise funds.

For spectators who attend to see a specific runner, the planned trajectory involves identifying together a way to find each other, such as deciding on a point or wearing specific colours. Apart from larger races that provide spectator guides, there are very few tools to support spectator trajectories in running events.

5.3 Participant trajectories

Actual runner trajectories may vary from the canonical one in a number of ways, including not sticking to the training plan, suffering from injuries, or not keeping to their intended pace. Depending on motivations, the pace may be either a very important goal or runners may allow themselves to stop to take pictures or have pictures taken, or to wear costumes that may impair their running. After the race, though all runners did click on the link, the decision to purchase depended on whether the pictures were good enough and how important the runners felt their achievement was.

For spectators whose plan is to see someone in particular, the difficulty of achieving this varied a lot, essentially depending on the density of runners, but also on the visibility of runner's clothing and

whether the runner would pass at the expected moment. The tasks involved in spectating include navigating around the course, cheering runners, locating specific runners, taking pictures, offering food to runners and/or talking with other spectators. These activities may sometimes overlap, interfere with each other or be coordinated within a group.

5.4 Historic trajectories

All participants did keep souvenirs of their races, be it through pictures or physical artefacts such as T-shirts and medals. Patterns for keeping and presenting them ranged from merely storing them in boxes and hard drives to displaying them at home or on social media profiles. Some participants did compositions out of these souvenirs, such as collages or blogs, and used them to tell larger story, such as good moments in a lifetime or a fundraising campaign.

The interviews showed underexploited potential for telling stories, not necessarily as souvenirs but to be shared as inspirations, as ways to engage between fundraisers, charities and donors, as alternative coverage of events, as ways of integrating one's story in a bigger story or as race reviews.

They also showed the importance of taking into account the social dynamics of sharing, as interviewees sometimes were unwilling to communicating around their achievements to people who achieved much better performances.

6. OTHER MEDIA TRAJECTORIES

6.1 The Glastonbury Festival at Home

Another study has just started, based on a diary used as a cultural probe (Gaver et al., 1999), around the media coverage of the Glastonbury music festival earlier this summer. 17 participants have been recruited to document their experience of Glastonbury from Home, 13 of which have actually sent diary entries during the study. At the time of publishing, all data had been gathered and was awaiting analysis.

As part of the BBC's User Experience Research Partnership, this study has been conducted with support from the public broadcaster's Research and Development department and should lead to designing services that could support the experience of presence (Lombard, 1997).

6.2 Media trajectories and lifelong learning

The partnership with the BBC will also include working with commissioners from the Knowledge and Learning department and reflecting upon how media trajectories can be used to support lifelong

learning in complex contexts where BBC content is only one part of the experience.

7. FUTURE WORK

Within the next few months, data from the marathon and music festival studies will be further analysed and opportunities for design will be identified.

The second year of my PhD will see the development of prototypes of services that will support the trajectories of participants in large-scale events. The work done with BBC Knowledge and Learning will be slightly different and may lead to the development not only of prototypes to support the experience of end users but also of tools for designers and in-house commissioners.

After evaluating these designs, the third year of my PhD should allow me to go through another cycle of design and evaluation.

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