

A Walk on the Beach:

Using Technology for Reflecting and Recording

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This position paper considers the intersection making sense of our environment with digital equipment, and how sensemaking can look different depending on the context and conventions one is adhering to. It is meant to follow on the 'lunchtime walk' and 'Spectacle vs Experience' sessions at the previous Technology on the Trail workshop last spring, where Steve Harrison inspired workshop participants to take a lunchtime hike around Virginia Tech campus using technology, followed by an examination of the results. We explore one of the prime examples of inquiry from the session: a demonstration by workshop participant Andrew Kulak, in which he explores automatically generated pictures and user-created pictures from his hike.

First, let us begin by setting up the general scenario we are interested in studying. Imagine you are on a beach. You begin walking along the shore, taking it all in, fascinated by the wind, waves, salty air, sea shells and everything else you perceive. In a wide eyed manner, you snap images of your surroundings as you make first impressions of your environment. After some time, you turn around and walk back along the same path. Yet this time, you are a tourist. You choose to capture certain elements of the beach in a more targeted way, looking for where the sun meets the sea, hoping to come across the most unusual sea shells and feeling the need to document those more structured parts of your walk as a means of record and sharing.

This position paper explores a number of aspects of this experience. To start, how are the behaviors and the artifacts that they generate from these two walks different? And how does technology influence and drive these activities? A few concepts that may help us here is the contrast between first impressions (the first walk) and tourism (the second). Though both tend to involve experiencing the 'new', the former is linked with the entirety of the senses, responding to stimuli and making sense of our environment. However, the latter usually enacts certain performative measures, established by conventions outside of our own lived in experience.

This contrast can be clearly demonstrated with the Kulak demonstration at the 2017 workshop. After strapping a GoPro camera to his chest, he set out to walk around the drillfield on Virginia Tech campus. While his GoPro was constantly recording, he also had a camera that he used to take pictures of different vistas, objects, and interesting phenomena along the way. Later while reviewing the footage he found that while the GoPro captured the realism of his walk - the sidewalks, shirts of fellow walkers, lamp posts, cigarette butts, grass etc. - it was his photos that were more directed toward the appealing and interesting events that we would see distributed on social media sights. Therefore, it seems that his GoPro captured the entirety of his

environment and what his mind was continually perceiving and making sense of, almost like a stream of consciousness, whereas the camera aided in taking directed and temporally connected snapshots of scenes that fit within a touristic lens.

Even though our use of a camera cannot be entirely unconscious like the GoPro, at times it still has the essence of taking it all in. Further, it often can lend itself as more of an epistemic action for these first impressionistic purposes outside of tourism. For example, in my own life I have noted that I feel unprepared for an experience without my camera (which is now also my phone). I know that this is not entirely related to documentation because I have felt this drive to be continually clicking while on a hike or walk even when I have said to myself I will delete these photos later. And why is that? In some ways, I wonder if we rely on the taking of pictures to help us make sense of the in moment experience. Perhaps the act of photographing our environment allows us to frame what we are seeing in multiple ways to piece together a whole, or maybe it aids us in focusing on particular details while leaving noise out - almost like a filter to sustain our attention. However, others may see the compulsion as the drive to record and share our lives online - a practice more in line with the touristic lens.

And further still, how is this process similarly managed when other actors are involved? One of my good friends Ally Moser, a wildlife major, and I would frequently go on walks outside during our undergrad. Knowing a lot about the outdoors, she would often point out interesting details about the nature we passed by, explaining what we were looking at and how it came to be this way. It was a different way of experiencing nature than I was used to. Rather than just experience the ambience of outside, she was calling my attention to specific phenomena and sharing knowledge with me about it. In a way, this choice of details to point out reflects the actions of record from our tourism walk. Yet this was not from a tourist perspective, the lens that she saw things through did not focus on beauty, cultural trends or things that affected us, her conventions were more scientifically and ecologically driven. As such, I think it is important for us to not only consider how digital technology affects our sense making - but how the perspectives we take on also influence that process.

As an exercise for the workshop, I propose that we consider these questions while also putting them to the test with our own experiences. After having a theoretical and historical conversation about what we believe the differences between these two modes are (and if they are really separate modes at all), we should all go out and engage in these activities - either together or separately on our own time depending on the time available. Coming back together, I think we should share our findings and see if our initial assumptions about these modes are the same or different than our lived experience.

