

Memory Tree: Bringing Close People Together

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Summary.

It is a well-known fact that modern social media technology is capable of bringing together people that are far apart. However, would be possible to question if this same technology is also distancing away people that are actually geographically close to one another? Are we succumbing to the practicality of digital contact in order to satiate our inherent human desire for social contact? The Memory Tree is multimedia installation designed to merge both the digital and the face-to-face social interaction. It belongs to a broader project entitled “Campus Vivo”, which aims to improve social interaction between the students of the fairly new North Campus of the Federal University of Espírito Santo. Also, it acts as a learning platform...a fun opportunity to apply the computing and engineering knowledge they learnt into something tangible that will be on exhibition at the campus. The primary concept of the installation was simple: collect voice messages from people that are near each other play them back in order to boost social interaction. In order to fulfil its ultimate goal and become a tool for local social interaction, two key aspects had to be considered: location and timing. As for the location, it was chosen a tree near the graduate student office...the shadow of this particular tree provides the students a well-deserved relief from heat of the tropics and it has become a common spot for chitchat. The timing, Christmas, as people tend to be friendlier. The Memory Tree was decorated in a Christmas fashion, equipped with the usual ornaments, flashing lights, LED hoses, and baubles. The latter was equipped with little speakers, being four in total. Both the audio and the lighting were controlled by a setup that includes: an Android Smartphone, an Amplifier, and an Arduino controlling on/off switches. An Android application was also developed to be constantly monitoring the incoming WhatsApp voice messages and play them back using one of the four available speakers hidden inside the baubles. The hose used to hold the bauble also lights up indicating that a message was being played. A special roulette-like lighting scheme was used for aesthetic and entertainment purpose. The installation was on exhibition for two weeks receiving all sorts of messages, more than 600 in total. A video of the installation can be seen at: <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B8MgsIH2Bk8dbnRSRjFCdW51Y00/edit>