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Stumbling Across Interactivity: From Germany to the Oregon Coast

An Overview

Artist Gunter Denmig's "Project Stolpersteine" (literally "stumbling stone") is an installation spanning over 1,800 cities, towns, and villages across Europe. These metallic stones, numbering over 60,000, commemorate the victims who were deported and exterminated during the years 1933-1945 in Hitler's Final Solution and National Socialism movement (Demnig, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). These stones, placed in sidewalks, stairs, and walls, provide a physical reminder of place and time allowing people to have an intimate understanding of the past and learn to not repeat those same mistakes.

This installation, on its own is interactive in a way, but there is more to this display than walking around European towns looking at the metallic blocks. Numerous mobile applications (apps) are available to add additional interactivity by mapping the locations and information contained on these stones. The apps, all BCHof which are free, provide stone locations based on the Global Positioning System and maps providing directions to the stones based on the user's location. Some applications have different functions, such as social media interactivity or the ability to upload stories and pictures, but the basic mapping function is the primary commonality.

Links

- **Project *Stolpersteine*: http://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/**
  This web page is the original web page for the project. It outlines the original intent and provides additional information concerning sponsorship, calendars, and administration.
- ***Stolpersteine* in Berlin: http://stolpersteine-in-berlin.android.informer.com/**
  The *Stolpersteine* in Berlin is an example of the many *Stolpersteine* city mobile apps available to both Apple and Android users (See Figure 1).
- **The Holocaust & Germany - Project *Stolpersteine*: https://youtu.be/9uW5tObi2KE**
  The link above is YouTube video that made me aware of the project. The presenter, DocM77, is a native German describing the meaning of the project to individuals in Germany and provides a global perspective on Denmig's installation. While not directly related to the project, it demonstrates a good overview, meaning, and interactivity of the overall project.
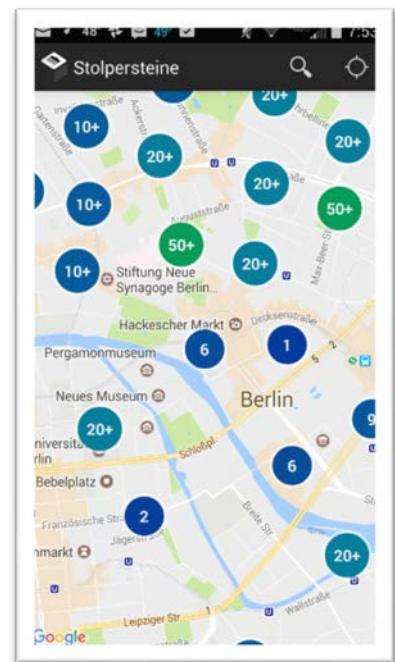

Figure 1: Basic map view with numbers of area Stolpersteine in the circles. Android OS screenshot.

This paper will examine and discuss both the original installation (labeled as "Project") as well as the associated mobile applications for interactivity and audience.

Interactive Features

Project

The interaction created by Demnig's installation is one built on interaction. Every viewer of a *Stolpersteine* must interact with the object because of their location. An individual has to actively and consciously look for and at the stone. Further, you have to bend over, a further interaction, in order to read each inscription. These unnatural actions require a person to consciously interact and develop a personal connection with the object and its meaning.

To take the interaction further, individuals, through their actions, are forcing others to acknowledge the *Stolpersteine* as others are required to walk around individuals looking at the stones. This passive interaction, in coordination with the prevalence of media, forces passers-by to both acknowledge the information known to be contained on the stones and have it be a reminder of prior choices and their effects.

Web Applications

The primary usage the web applications have is providing users a way to first, find any specific individual with a stone, and second, to provide a map of how to find a single stone or the nearest stone. This map functionality is the most basic function the multiple S*tolpersteine* applications share. This unobtrusive method of interaction allows users to draw their own conclusions about the object and its contents, allowing the "heavy lifting" of greater meaning to the individual looking and those who pass by who may stop and offer additional insight into this very personal and individual art installation.

Some other *Stolpersteine* applications have additional methods of adding interactivity to the project.

Background and Basic Information
Most of the apps have a brief section concerning the background of the project, its meaning and links to additional information. This form of interaction provides a framework for the project and a different perspective, if only a general one, to the people bothering to read the information.

Another common part of the apps is the inclusion of a brief biography or description of the individual associated with the stone. These biographies are often just simple dates and a brief description or recitation of the inscription on the stone (See Figure 2). Other times, these biographies contain longer discussions or stories uploaded by family.

Searches
Most S*tolpersteine* apps have the capability of looking individual *Stolpersteines* by name or location. This makes finding an individual stone easy. This is especially the case in areas of a high density of stones present.

Figure 2: Sample biography page in German. Android OS Screenshot.

Social Media
The benefits of social media – Twitter, Facebook, and the ilk – are well known to many. Connectivity with the world allows for the spread and sharing of experiences across distances. While these are

beneficial in spreading the word, I have to believe, these are there for primarily token reasons. People expect social media at this point.

The social media, in my own opinion, can detract from the project's meaning and could drown out the impact the *Stolpersteines* are intended to effect. Still, I have to allow for social media's inclusion as I have never been to Germany, or many of the countries, *Stolpersteine* are installed, and would never have been introduced to such a profound and important idea and cultural memory.

Media Upload
Many of the S*tolpersteine* apps allow for individuals to upload pictures and/or stories to accompany the individual *Stolpersteine* entries (See Figure 3). This added capability creates links between the past and the present for the individuals providing the media. The capability is a sensible addition as it provides personalization for the individuals and the families of these victims allowing them to know their family's and culture's memories to not be lost to time.

Additionally, to those viewing the exhibit, the additional information provides a more personal feature to connect with than a simple stone with writing (though after viewing the American Vietnam Memorial, I cannot underestimate this as a powerful reminder). These additional connections can shed light on complete families, the fear of those involved, and the state of Germany at the time of the Final Solution.
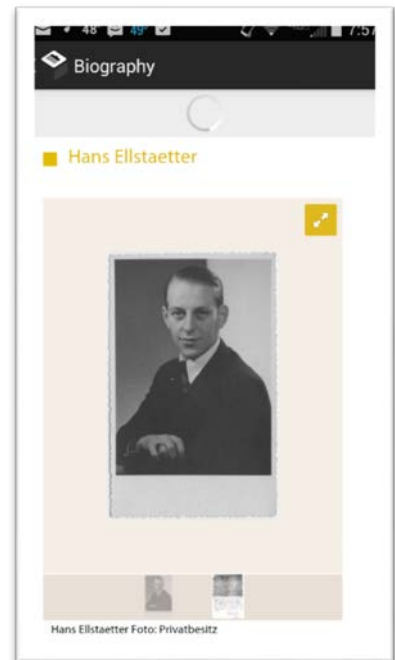

Figure 3: Standard media upload. Android OS Screenshot.

Interactivity for Benton County Historical Society and the Meola Films

Project S*tolpersteine*, is based in geography, the stones are intimately tied to the locations they inhabit as the homes of the individuals taken. The Meola Films at the Benton County Historical Society (BCHS) can be looked at in the same geographical sense. The Meola family traveled up and down the Oregon Coast and the places they stopped and filmed have meaning able to be tied to both the geography and the time period the film was made.

The mapping capability in the *Stolpersteine* apps is very relevant and applicable to the geographical nature of the Meola films. The physical travel from location to location on the Oregon Coast with the assistance of global positioning would allow people to not only trace the route the Meola family but allow the differences between the two time periods to become apparent. This movement would also allow those following the tour to experience both the Oregon Coast and the Meola films differently than they would sitting in front of a computer or film screen.

The Meola Films would benefit greatly from social media interaction as the meaning of the exhibit is to illustrate and share Oregon with viewers, a very external experience as opposed to the intimate and personal nature exhibited by the S*tolpersteine* Project. Coupled with the basis in geography, social media would allow people to "check in" (via apps like Yelp), share stories or thoughts in real time (Facebook or Twitter), or share pictures in the area (SnapChat). These capabilities would add to not only the notoriety of the project, but allow people to share their experiences.

There could also be an added benefit to the BCHS if these experiences could be uploaded and linked to the individual films in some way (this would require some copyright release or approval of use as well as significant infrastructure not currently owned by BCHS). The museum could then put together virtual

displays able to be placed and searched on the primary web site. These additional documentary items could also be used by researchers for multiple research uses.

Audiences

Project Stolpersteine is aimed at the world, but is directed, specifically towards those directly affected by the Holocaust – Germans and the persecuted groups. In the same way, the Meola films are dually directed. Native Oregonians, even those who live on the coast, would benefit from the interactive features outlined because it allows for a comparison of times, providing insights into the history of place. The map interactivity is also beneficial to tourists allowing for directions to places of interest.

The social media is primarily present for tourists. The ability to directly share experiences can allow for an easy way of creating a memory book or to pass on memories to friends and family, but also to others as well. Social media is not as directly useful to those who live in the area, but the additional exposure can bring business to the most depressed part of Oregon.

The accumulation of media, as uploaded by visitors, can allow for individuals to share, indirectly, with a greater number of people than direct social media, experiences, thoughts, and photos. This can, over time, create a new culture helping to shed light on both the geography and time of the Meola films.

References

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