

[Home](#) » [Technology](#) » Article

Memories light the corners of my PC



Virtual recall ... Gordon Bell casts his hard drive back to some happy times with the click of a mouse button.

Photo: *Tanya Lake*

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A researcher has found an ideal memory aid - a digital back-up, writes Ian Sample in London.

GORDON BELL doesn't need to remember, but has no chance of forgetting. At the age of 71, he is recording as much of his life as technology will allow, storing it all on a vast database: a digital facsimile of a life lived.

If he goes for a walk, a tiny camera that dangles from his neck snaps pictures every minute or so, immediately committing the scene to a memory built not of neurons but ones and noughts. If he wanders into a cafe, sensors note the change in light, the shift of temperature and store the information. Conversations are recorded and steps logged on a GPS receiver he carries.

Dr Bell has now stored so much of his life on computer that he is in danger of forgetting how to remember.

"I look at it as a surrogate memory," he says. If he wants to recall something, he picks his way through months of information until he finds what he is after. It was all dreamt up at Microsoft's Bay Area Research Centre in San Francisco, where Dr Bell works.

He agreed to become a guinea pig in his own life's experiment, to push the boundaries of information that computers can handle. In an era of relationships defined by informal emails, of mobile phones snapping crimes as they unfold, the project was seen as an extension of our desire to store snippets of our existence. By recording his life in the present, Dr Bell hopes to give a glimpse of all our lives in the future.

At first, he merely scanned books and work documents, but the project ballooned, embracing the mundane and the moving: details of plumbers sit digitally alongside letters from his children and

his advice when they hit difficult times. Conversations with his grandchildren and his wife are there too. Occasional musings on the world that would otherwise be confined to a diary now go straight into the database, accompanied by a thousand pages of medical records.

As far as Microsoft is concerned, the digital database, known as MyLifeBits, is a unique challenge for the company's programmers. If computers will one day store even a minor mountain of detail from our public and private lives, how will we organise it? What software will rummage through our electronic minds for connected events, perhaps a conversation about a picture taken on some seaside trip?

A perennial issue facing Dr Bell is privacy.

He has logged all but a handful of his most personal experiences. Some of the information held on the database is also of ambiguous ownership. Who decides who else can pore over the details of the conversations he has had, the people he has met?

An early insight into a weakness of the system revealed how reliant Dr Bell had become on his "surrogate memory". The hard drive of his computer crashed, losing four months of data.

He describes it as "a severe emotional blow, perhaps like having one's memories taken away". Dr Bell has also had to wrestle with the knowledge that, barring crashes, he has lost the luxury of forgetting.

Frank Nack at the Centre for Mathematics and Computer Science in Amsterdam says a perfect memory is in many ways a curse. "There are stages when it's good to be able to forget, so in that case, this technology is counterproductive," he says.

More worrying to Dr Nack is the effect Dr Bell's vision could have on a future society. Stick a video camera in someone's face and they will behave differently, he says.

Dr Bell is less worried about such problems, instead highlighting the potential the system could have, not least for those who are literally losing their minds. Already, a similar system is being tested by a small group of people with degenerative brain disease.

For Dr Bell, MyLifeBits is more of a back-up memory.

"There were people walking around New Orleans after [Hurricane] Katrina with soggy shoeboxes of things. My whole life moves with me, I don't need to carry these things," he said.

The Guardian

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