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A rolling stone gathers no moss and other consumer conspiracies

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In April 2010, a group of trans-disciplinary academics launched the web project
www.talesofthings. The site offered a simple but novel approach to recording social histories
and a playful critique of the tagging culture that is associated with the emerging concept
known as the 'Internet of Things'. Our platform allows anybody to attach web content (text,
image, video and audio) to an artefact through the generation of a unique QR barcode that
the owner is encouraged to stick to their thing. When scanned by somebody else using a
smart phone, media is launched and the object can be seen/heard to tell a story about the
memories that it is associated with.

Our reasoning was simple, that the existing public use of tags (RFID, traditional barcodes and
two dimensional) is based upon a 'read only' relationship. And although the web savvy
amongst us can generate a QR code and associate it with web-based media, for many
people the scanning of codes is a practice reserved for people working on super market
checkouts and in passport control booths. As well as offering a place in which unique codes
are generated and allow stories to be associated with artefacts, TalesofThings allows any
other beholder the ability to 'add a tale' to someone else's 'thing'. By scanning a tag through
the phone App, or by visiting the website, artefacts become 'writeable' and 'open' to further
association. This is a critical dimension to the projects politics, that lessons learnt through
Web 2.0 should be integral to any Internet of Things.

Following our launch last April the website began accruing stories that were associated with
peoples actual material artefacts. However as the immaterial database grew it became clear
that we needed an event that allowed the material artefacts to become an interface to our
internet of things, rather than online repository of stories. RememberMe at Future Everything
offered this context. The RememberMe artwork was a collaborative project with the Oxfam
shop charity shop, in Manchester. During FutureEverything 2010, a research assistant based
in the shop, asked people who dropped things off to tell a brief story about one of the objects
into a microphone: where they acquired it, what memories it brings back and any associated
stories. These audio clips were then linked to an RFID tag and QR code and attached to the
items as they joined the shop's stock. Visitors to the shop, including conference delegates
were able to use bespoke RFID readers, or their own smart phone to browse artefacts that
were displayed amongst the many thousands of other objects. Labels highlighted the
RememberMe objects and once triggered, speakers located in the shop replayed the
previous owners story, evoking a ghost from the past. Once tagged the objects were in the
public domain for purchase by other members of the community, and the project's iPhone and
Android apps allowed new owners to access old stories but equally importantly, add their own.

This material 'turn' in the life of the project readdressed the balance of where the immaterial
data was located. Instead of being accessed through a web interface, the RememberMe work
explored the potential of the TalesofThings project to manifest a social Internet of Things that
is situated in the event based context of exchange. An exchange of things and stories that
contests many of the habitual consumer practices that have formerly defined concepts of
value, quality and the destiny of artefacts. This year we wanted to exploit the projects 'write
back' feature and see if we couldn't tip the balance between immaterial and material in favour
of the former. In RememberUs, the team has set up two shops that act as supernatural
portals to the Internet of Things. Visitors to the Oxfam Emporium are invited to 'let go' of
memories that are associated with particular things by attaching stories to our memory
vessels, moments later in the Oxfam Originals shop just down the street, people will 'pick up'
your memory and the memories of others when they are associated with another 'thing' that

they choose buy. Leaving the shop with what may be perceived to be a second hand item, shoppers will take with them many, many memories that have been associated with their new shoes, trousers or dress, exploding the assumption that a rolling stone gathers no moss. In a network society every 'thing' is part of a vocabulary of exchanges, in which artefacts are increasingly becoming hosts to multiple meanings and values. Keeping each thing open to interpretation may prove to be a critical role that consumers can play in resisting the determinism of vendors who would have us believe that a rolling stone has only one purpose as it travels downhill toward its grave.