

PixelWish: Collective Wish-Making and Social Cohesion

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Abstract. This paper discusses the concept of a network-mediated system for making wishes and sending them remotely to people whom we care about. Particularly at occurrences of critical events, i.e. crises, when shared emotional connection [1] and group bond is most likely to develop, we believe this system will have positive emotion effects on both the wish-senders and the wish-receivers. We propose this to be a novelty design of community-ware, and believe it has strong potentials in utilizing information technologies to turn ‘digital divide’ into ‘digital cohesion’. [2]

Keywords: Online communities, community-ware, wish-making, social cohesion, emotional connection, Graphical User Interface (GUI).

1 Introduction

Wish-making is a common human behavior. Ancient Greeks threw coins into wells, hoping to keep the wells from drying up. Today, people throw coins in fountains to make their wishes come true. Fetishism aside, making wishes is as natural as breathing for many of us. When a wish is made, there is always the desire that it might be granted. Wishing is hence closely linked to *hope*, one of the identified character strengths in the study of *Positive Psychology* that contributes to the mental wellness of mankind. [3]

Generally speaking, people make two types of wishes: the “me-oriented” wishes that aim to bestow oneself with good fortune, and the “them-oriented” wishes that ask for well-being for others whom we care about. While the former is usually concealing in nature, the wisher for the latter is usually glad to communicate the wish to its

intended receiver. Sending well wishes to someone is synonymous with sending your blessings, and the positive emotions involved are essential in cultivating understandings and mutual bond. This project explores network-supported exchanges of well wishes as a cohesive force in promoting healthy communities and cross-cultural understandings.

1.1 Collective Wish-Making

In addition to sending well wishes to friends and families, as citizens of societies and the world at large, we also collectively send wishes to show concern for our fellow men. This was evident during the SARS outbreak in 2003 in Hong Kong, and the Tsunami incident that scourged SE Asia in 2005. In the former, throughout the months of dark period when the only news on television was about locations of outbreak and the day's death-roll, people in Hong Kong were touched by the professionalism and courage of frontline medical personnel who risked their lives in treating patients who contracted SARS. In order to show their gratitude and moral support, people voluntarily posted little heart-shaped memos with written wishes and thank you notes onto notice boards at hospitals. Doctors and nurses responded to these wishes with even greater commitment to their duties of saving lives, and it was this constant exchange of blessings that had helped people in Hong Kong through the difficult times of SARS.

The Tsunami attack witnessed a slightly different form of emotional exchange and collective wish-making. Touched by stories of the disaster, communities all over the world felt the need to express their concern for the less fortunate people in Indonesia, and so candle nights were organized and Mass was particularly dedicated to remotely pray and wish for the victims.

1.2 Supporting Shared Emotional Need

These two incidents show that empathy is very likely to develop during crisis situations, resulting in positive social actions of collective wish-making. When this happens, it is in fact the most favorable opportunity to build human bonds. Unfortunately, as was evident in both cases, this shared emotional need of sending others well wishes is not currently supported by effective methods, thus impeding its great potentials: pinning up of paper wishes was confined geographically with limited participation only by residents in the neighborhood of hospitals, and Tsunami victims and their families remained ignorant to the invisible blessings from afar, which might well have brought much needed comfort and strength to face their miseries.

We thus argue that if this strong emotional need of collective wish-making is properly channeled and effectively supported, it will promise to generate positive forces in promoting social cohesion, and might well result in resolving conflicts and overcoming other negative emotions amongst individuals and communities. While most information and communication technologies (ICTs) systems are for supporting general purpose communication, we identify the exchange of well wishes as a niche communication area to support, offering new design opportunities.

2 Design Concept

Our motivation for this project is threefold: to provide a common platform for collective wish-making to meet the psychological need of bestowing others with our blessings, to facilitate greater participation from local communities, and to promote global, cross-cultural understandings. The proposed PixelWish system combines collective wish-making with basic concepts of an online message board, except that visuals replace text as the main mode of communication.

2.1 System Overview

The basic configuration of the proposed PixelWish system comprises dedicated terminals for sending and retrieving wishes, and a large screen display to show a cumulative view of sent wishes. The system is proposed to be installed in the heart of the city in public spaces like shopping malls or subway stations, providing easy access to the community. People access PixelWish terminals to interact with the system. Pixel Wishes could be sent to cell phone numbers as well as to the virtual entity of the 'PixelWish Tree'. All sent wishes will be shown on the large screen display. When a Pixel Wish is sent to a mobile phone number, a QR Code representing the wish will be sent instead. The wish receiver will then need to physically access the PixelWish terminals to have the QR code scanned in order to retrieve the respective Pixel Wish.

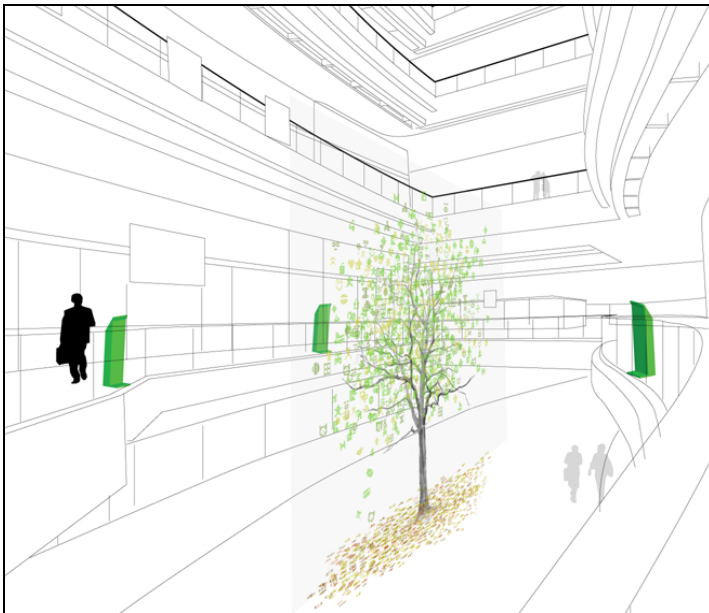


Fig. 1. The PixelWish system is proposed to comprise of dedicated terminals for sending and viewing wishes, and a large, projected or LCD screen to display uploaded Pixel Wishes

2.2 Pixel Wishes as Pictograms

Each Pixel Wish is comprised of a pictogram coupled with a simple text message. Since initial user surveys confirmed the interests in a visual rather than a textual interface, the pictogram is proposed as a mandatory representation of a Pixel Wish while the text message is optional. Unless restricted by the wish sender, all Pixel Wishes sent through the system could be freely viewed by others. People click onto each Pixel Wish pictogram to view its attached text message.

To create a Pixel Wish, a user clicks on a 7x7 dot matrix graphic in the ‘Make-a-Wish’ interface. The use of low resolution dot matrix pictogram is intended to ease people’s fear of drawing while providing a reasonable degree of creative freedom at the same time. Our goal is to design a system that provokes self-expression and stimulates new form of communication, as well as one that is less restricted by language barriers.

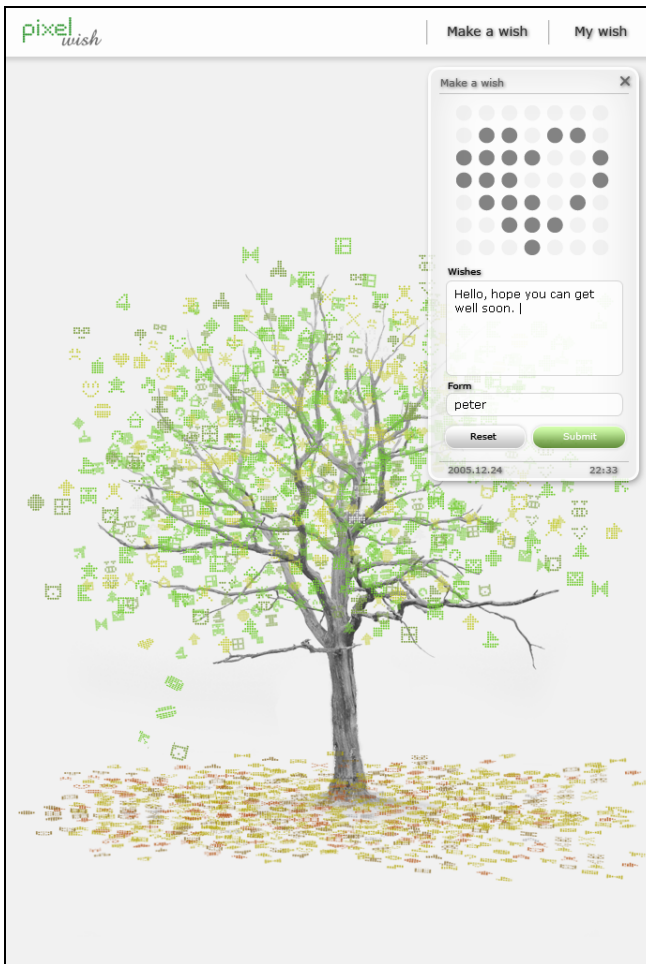


Fig. 2. Main screen of the PixelWish system

To test whether a 7x7 dot matrix is capable of producing recognizable shapes and decent pictograms, paper prototypes were made with perforated holes in the same configuration. To make a pictogram, people selectively punched through these perforations with a sharp instrument like using the tip of a pencil. About a hundred of these paper cards were distributed for testing, resulting in a good variety of pictogram designs that confirmed the viability of the 7x7 matrix. The test also received favorable feedback on the personalization and playfulness of creating one's unique pictogram design.

2.3 Hierarchy of Pixel Wish Messages

Each Pixel Wish appears as its representational pictogram hanging on the digital image of a tree. The display of Pixel Wishes follow a generic timeline, with the latest uploaded wishes in full brightness, and gradually fade both in saturation and in luminance with the passing of time, until assuming a dull grey color when they will eventually fall to the bottom of the screen. But once retrieved and viewed by a user, wishes disregarding their current nodes in the timeline will be revitalized and assume full brightness again.

The tree metaphor for the PixelWish system is actually inspired by the famous 'Lam Tsuen Wishing Tree' in a suburb area of Hong Kong. For many years, people have been hanging their written wishes and wish packets onto the tree's branches with the belief that what they wished for will come true. Indeed, these wish packets could be seen as constituting to the collective memories of Hong Kong. The PixelWish Tree interface aims to capture a similar memory notion with accumulated wish exchanges.

3 Design for Social Cohesion

Rather than residing in the virtual world as a website, the PixelWish system emphasizes the importance of a physical presence in the city. The physicality of publicly displaying current and accumulative Pixel Wishes is seen as an important attribute of the PixelWish system. The goal is to reveal a community's current issues of concern or the emotional states of a city right in front of the eyes of its inhabitants. We believe this will forge people's understandings and connection with their own local contexts.

For catastrophes of worldwide concern like the Tsunami or the 911 Attack, sending wishes through PixelWish terminals and watching one's pictogram wish lighted up together with many other pictogram wishes could be a gratifying experience, and could help to develop a sense of efficacy in individuals. In addition, one's civic participation is acknowledged, and the sense of belonging to a much larger community is recognized, both of which being essential features in maintaining social cohesion. [4, 5] And since the social cohesiveness of a society determines its response to fears and uncertainty in unfavorable times, the stronger the cohesive force, the mightier will be the shared will to overcome obstacles and persevere.

We also envision a scenario where PixelWish systems were installed worldwide in global cities. In cases when unfortunate incidents of worldwide concern occurred, geographically dispersed local systems could be opened up for international linkages

and be networked together to form a united communication platform. For instance, at different time slots, the system could be broadcasting PixelWish Trees from different overseas cities. In this manner, Pixel Wishes from all over the world could genuinely reach the local community that was experiencing the crisis. We believe this will have positive effect in cultivating understandings and bonds across nations.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we described a networked system that aims to support collective wish-making to express our concern for our fellow men. We have pointed out a real emotional need and a virtuous behavior that has great potentials in alleviating differences and in promoting fellowship. The proposed PixelWish system is a novelty design concept that aims to sensitively support this need in order to cultivate social cohesion. Although interactions amongst users of the PixelWish system are comparatively limited compared to other online communities, we nonetheless argue that users of the PixelWish system constitute a valid community as they commonly share the significance and value of bestowing their fellow men with blessings. This common motivation to participate actually transcends personal needs or professional interests – the common ties for most other online communities. We believe the PixelWish system offers a positive contribution in building the strengths and virtues that enable communities to thrive.

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