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Augmenting everyday objects (4/9/2005)

Technically, everything around us can be augmented with computers and provide extra information or functionalities to enhance our life. A magic toothbrush could possibly signal me when to stop brushing when my teeth are clean enough; a magic recycle bin could tell me if there is any environmentally-unfriendly trash inside; a magic refrigerator could have an automatically updated inventory display; a magic wardrobe could suggest me the right clothes to wear according to the weather, my schedule and other contextual information. However, do we really want to live in a world of everything being augmented? Apparently, I do not.

Objects that I would like to see augmented are things that have special meanings for me, and through the augmentation I can have an emphasized communication with the object that is about my status, quality and affection. When I see an object which is meaningful to me, the part of my memory about that object is awakened and the image synthesizer in my mind starts to play. Sometimes, the emotion arose by the object is sweet; sometimes, it is bitter which makes me avoid getting into that object again. It is all about memory, but objects do not have memory, only we do. So I think maybe we can make those objects have the ability to trigger our memory that is important to us. I will describe an object that I am emotionally attached to and how I will augment it with the ambient intelligence.

A magic spoon that remembers the taste of life

For so many years when I had meals with my family at home, I only ate with my huge aluminum spoon. If I dined out, my mother would not let anyone else use it. It has become not just an anonymous spoon that everyone can use, it is my personal object, or to a larger extent, it represents me. Needless to say, I brought it to the states and now it has become my only companion on the dining table. I always think of my family and my mother's homemade dishes, the spoon is the object of nostalgia as the temperature, the shape and the subtle aftertaste of the spoon when it is in my mouth all have not changed – they are cue points that I can recall my memories of eating with my family at home.

In the light of this, maybe the spoon can be embedded with speakers that play recorded sounds of my family and me having dinner together. Maybe my mother can leave voice messages to my spoon and the messages would be played when I eat, it could be like when she was talking to me and asking what I had done in the day during the dinner. I envision optimistically that by these tactile (the spoon) and auditory stimuli, the food I made would taste a bit better. I think there is a lot of people, who are leaving home for work or study, eat alone. A personal eating utensil that has audio memories or provide asynchronous communications with family members will be useful for them.
