

Designing for Cultural Connections

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Abstract. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti not only devastated the country's infrastructure, it also left many orphaned children, which accelerated the pace of international transracial adoptions by families in the United States and other developed countries. While international adoptees such as these Haitian children are older and will therefore likely remember some aspects of their birth culture, often younger children are at risk of forgetting much of their cultural and linguistic heritage. Despite much research on international transracial adoptions, surprisingly few web-based resources are available to adoptees for exploring and connecting with their birth cultures. To address this shortcoming, we used an iterative approach of ethnographic methods, paper prototypes, usability testing and heuristic evaluations to design Synergy, a system which allows adoptees to explore and connect with their birth cultures and its people autonomously.

Keywords: Virtual culture, international transracial adoptees, virtual tour, birth culture, adoptions, avatars.

1 Introduction

Imagine you are forever a foreigner in the country in which you grew up, you are always asked where you come from, why you look so different from your parents, can you speak your parents' language or they use gestures with you, sometimes people address you in a foreign tongue and try to connect you to a country and a people foreign to you, you feel as if you have "adoptee" written on your forehead...

In the United States alone, a staggering 213,496 international adoptions took place during the period 1999-2009 [16]. International adoptions happen when children are adopted from a country that is different from the adopting parents' country [9]. Many of these adoptions are transracial, which implies that the adopted children are in a different racial or ethnic group than are their adoptive parents [9, 17]. In 2009, the top five countries for adoptions were China, Ethiopia, Russia, South Korea and Guatemala [16]. In the United States, adoption parents are often middle-class and affluent [9, 14] and have the resources to provide special medical care and an excellent education to adoptees [1, 7].

Many children who are adopted as infants will likely easily assimilate or take on the values of their surrounding culture and family, but older children might find it more difficult to adapt to and accept the adoptive culture as their own since they have already formed some type of connection or idea about their birth culture [9]. For example, the January 2010 Haiti earthquake left many children orphaned with the result that American parents adopted approximately 1,150 Haitian orphans in one year alone [3]. Many of the children orphaned by the earthquake were older and more likely to have strong ties to their birth culture. Nevertheless, international transracial adoptees such as these Haitian orphans may successfully adopt the culture of their upbringing, but their race will not change and, as we will discuss, this has implications in the formation of their identities [1, 7].

Adoptees often struggle with self-identity, which includes physical appearance, birth culture and the culture of upbringing [7, 17]. Children become aware of differences in their physical appearances by themselves, through teasing by peers, or because of the way strangers view and engage with them and their family group [17].

Younger children identify racially and ethnically with their birth cultures, but for most children this identification diminishes in adolescence or early adulthood. Nevertheless, for some children, race and ethnicity becomes more accentuated by early adulthood when adoptees leave the parental home and neighborhoods [7, 9]. One non-Caucasian adoptee stated that she drew herself as having blonde hair and big blue eyes, which are visual characteristics associated with Caucasians [6, 17]. She added that when she was introduced to her birth culture, she “explored the contours of her DNA, personality and her essence” [6]. Children who resemble the race of their parents, e.g. Russian children adopted by Caucasian parents, experience fewer identity problems associated with physical appearance and race [7].

One way to address the cultural challenges of being a transracial adoptee is to learn about one's birth culture [9, 17]. In this paper, we assume that this connection is valuable. However, most families are not able to travel to the birth country of their children nor do they have the means to give their children first-hand experiences of their birth cultures. As a result, parents often rely upon culture camps, books, a native person, or their own knowledge about the children's birth cultures [7, 13].

Some adoptees applauded culture camps because they eased their isolation by allowing them to meet similar families and learn about their birth culture and language [7]. Nevertheless, one informant complained that culture camps offer a superficial experience where adoptees are separated from other people in their communities and those who teach them about their birth culture are not themselves natives of these cultures. It is important, therefore, that positive role models from their birth cultures should be part of this cultural experience [7, 9, 17]. Adoptees who have little contact with role models who are native to their birth countries will be more likely to have difficulty “developing pride in their race, ethnicity or culture” [7, 17] or in some cases, they might even be rejected by members of their own ethnic or racial group if they assimilate into the adopted culture [7, 12].

Although many resources are available to parents of adopted children to assist them in exploring or learning about their children's birth cultures, very few resources are available to the adoptees themselves [7, 8].

2 The Design Process of the Synergy Project

This project is an attempt to design a web-based tool that will help international, transracial adoptees explore and appreciate their birth cultures, connect with similar adoptees, families and mentors, and native people from their birth cultures.

As part of our data collection, we reviewed documentaries that featured expert discussions and vignettes from adoptees' lives [1,6,11]. We also reviewed the content of specialized adoptee social networking sites and international adoption web sites [2,5]. We held preliminary informal discussion rounds with two families, adult adoptees and an American sibling of two adoptees. We then held semi-structured interviews with six potential users, consisting of adoptees, adoptive parents and experts in adoption issues. The user group consisted of three adult adoptees, one of whom is an adoptee culture camp counselor; a father of two younger adoptees with American siblings; two mothers of two adoptees each, one of whom is also involved in an orphanage. All but two of our informants were women.

Interview questions were guided by literature reviews, documentaries and our preliminary discussion rounds about adoptions. Interviews were conducted in person, via cellphone and Skype. One interview was conducted at a place of work while another one was conducted in the home of the potential user. This venue was particularly rich because it enabled our informants to show us many artifacts that were acquired and showcased in their residence to help blend their children's' birth culture with the American culture in order to instill a sense of pride and belongingness.

2.1 Requirements Analysis

Our interviews and literature review each suggest that racial and ethnic identity becomes more salient for adoptees entering adulthood [9] and adoptees are also more likely to start exploring their birth cultures or visit their country of birth then. Further, we determined that it is only when adoptees become adults that they can request their adoption files and birth information, which would allow them to initiate searches for parents and family histories [5, 7]. As a consequence, we concluded that our target user group should be adult adoptees (i.e., 18 years or older).

Adoptees held diverse perspectives and views of themselves. A few of our informants assimilated with their adopted culture and had no interest in viewing themselves as being different from the adopted culture, others rejected their birth or adopted cultures, while some embraced both cultures [7, 9, 11, 15]. We took these divergent views into consideration and based our personas only on individuals who would be willing, to one degree or another, to explore their birth cultures.

Based on the information gathered, we created personas, scenarios and storyboards to help define the problem space and users' characteristics.

2.2 Interface Designs, Prototyping and Usability Testing

We then designed a paper prototype of screen sketches based on the personas, scenarios and storyboards.

Informational feedback on the paper prototype was solicited from the six users interviewed. The users evaluated the prototype by giving verbal feedback and

suggesting improvements and additions to screens, layouts, and functionality. We also evaluated our designs based on Nielsen's usability heuristics [12].

Feedback from the informants for the prototype was incorporated into new paper sketches and medium fidelity screens.

2.3 Proposed System

We decided on the name "Synergy" because it refers to cultural synergies and its definition "the sum is greater than its parts" implied that understanding both adoptive and birth cultures results in a more balanced and positive human being. Synergy is a web-based tool where a user can explore a country's culture in an interactive way with the help of a virtual avatar as a guide. The user also has a social networking resource page to connect with different communities and adoption resource sites.

The user can edit the avatar to take on different personalities, gender, gestures or physical forms such as human and non-human forms and they can wear traditional costumes, jewelry and accessories from the country chosen. A picture of the user's face can be taken by webcam or uploaded and displayed/modeled on the avatar.

Non-human avatars were included as part of the avatar selection after usability testing revealed that male users preferred non-human avatars. This is also consistent with findings that males prefer "outlandish avatars that stand out" [4].

The system will display various components of the culture being explored. These include cultural characteristics such as daily rituals, language translators, representations of music and dance.

The initial content will be collected from books and the Internet. International students will be asked to serve as content judges and contribute supplementary material such as pictures, videos and experiences.

A social networking media content model will be followed for dynamic content generation wherein any user can create a profile and upload pictures, videos, and textual information with appropriate commentary or reviews in a wiki. This page will also display suggestions such as places to visit, lodging arrangements, food vendors, and important cultural or civic events.

3 Conclusion and Future Work

The system is currently at a prototype stage, but will mature quickly with continued iterative design. One missing element is the content generated with input from international students. An important conclusion derived from our interviews and informal testing is that such a system is truly needed by transracial adoptees as well as family and friends of this stakeholder group.

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