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Editorial

Humans are social creatures. To experience unwanted loneliness deprives us of a very basic humanity. The risk of ending up alone increases the older we get. Growing old increase the risk of acquaints with such challenges as retirement, illness and the loss of those nearest and dearest to us. Even though the structures of modern society may compensate for the physical decline associated with growing older, we also need to stay socially connected if we are to live our lives to the fullest. And being socially connected seems to reduce physical decline and illness.

It might be a sound investment for Western societies to devote more focus to social relations, as it increases life quality and decrease the resources needed for illness and care.

To do something about loneliness, we first have to move beyond the very idea of the elderly as a set category and to start thinking of old people as being as individually different as the rest of mankind is. The next step is to reintroduce the term 'elders', thereby restoring the respect – respect for experiences and resources.

These basic tenets are what the Express to Connect project rest on, when developing tools that will help elders, children and friends to see each other. To reveal who we are and what stories and resources we have at our disposal, we are looking for new ways of "playing with our life". – Yes, E2C is a game! We think that fun and social relation work well together. But what kind of game?

... Is this going to be easy to create a game that helps strengthen and building social relations? Not at all! But we think that it can be done if we dare to ask hard questions and involve elders in the search for new answers. We know in which direction to search. But the final solution can only emerge with the cooperation of our elders.

The purpose of this E2C Newsletter is to offer our readers insight into what measures we are taking to meet these difficult challenges, as well as what we have already accomplished during the first year.

Thomas Hammer-Jakobsen
Copenhagen Living Lab

New understanding of loneliness – Social connectedness and innovation tracks

Drawing on social/cultural theory and analysis, we have defined social connectedness as a framework for how individuals, at one hand, relate functionally to society in terms of producing, reproducing and consuming. On the other hand, they relate emotionally to other individuals with a preference for either sharing or solitude. When this personal social order is disturbed by greater structural upheavals (such as retirement), certain strategies take place for compensating the 'missing link' - created by feelings of either grief or relief.

It often requires a new mind-set and ways of functioning to redefine or establish a new personal order. This can be very difficult and may connect to a higher risk of loneliness. We see that age-related loneliness follows from three main challenges: retirement in itself, one's own illness or the loss of dear one(s). They might co-occur and imply a range of barriers for people to feel social connectedness.

These are the exact barriers in which E2C focuses, and the basis from which we have created five tracks of innovation to guide and direct the design concept and prototyping process.

Involvement of elders

Inspired by and based on LEGO Serious Play, REALplay is a way of working with an initial understanding of a certain topic based on sharing personal experiences, perspectives and insights regarding the issue(s) at stake. Therefore, the specific user-group engaging in REALplay workshops has to reflect the problem addressed – in the case of E2C we have worked with approximately 50 retired persons with different work histories and periods of retirement behind them.

The six hour workshop uses building and playing with Lego bricks as a method, based on the premise that a set of key questions can be answered by building symbolic and metaphoric models, which are in turn presented to the group. An example of a question is: "What can spoil or challenge social relations in seniors' lives? Take 20 minutes to 'build' your answer."

The findings from this initial gathering of insights helped to focus the key research questions for exploring – based on ethnographic methods – in depth a range of 20 individual perceptions and everyday practices related to social connectedness and loneliness after retirement.

Heimo Pesonen: Looking for a service that is easy to use and comprehend

By the late fall 2010, three different service concepts were created, and they were first tested through group discussions in Sweden, Denmark and Finland. After analyzing the results, the best concept turned out to be a game designed to encourage reminiscing, with an additional module supporting story telling.

Heimo Pesonen, the chairman of the Vantaa-based SeslonkiSociety, took part in the Finnish Express to Connect workshop held in December. The society for senior citizens, founded a year ago, aims to activate its members by encouraging them to participate in volunteer work, thus offering them meaningful activities.

What kind of thoughts did the workshop raise for you?
- Personally, I found the theme very interesting. During my professional life, I took part in the development of several concepts encouraging people to use more self services. In the Express to Connect project and workshop, the theme was services that would decrease loneliness among senior citizens.

And what is your opinion on the group discussions?
- The backgrounds, and thus the preparedness, of the participants were very varied. At first I was afraid that this might complicate things and affect the discussion. But in the end it turned out that different starting points were very much a positive thing: matters can be approached from various different angles.

What kind of things would encourage you to use a social net service?
- The service should be well integrated into daily activities, and very easy to use. Highly specific net services attract only a small group of people, who already are quite active and able to find social interaction and contacts even outside the Internet.

What particular matters should be taken into consideration in the development of the service? - The service must be widely acceptable and recommendable. In other words, it should be tested extensively and in different situations. Also keep in mind that the development work should not document the current state as such, but rather take the service forward gradually. An important challenge in commercial services, such as this, is the pricing: elders are quite careful with their money.

Play with your life

The game *Play with your life* (working title) builds on the idea that in storytelling and reminiscing people re-establish their identity and relationships. In the game photos are used as memory triggers to invite people to tell stories and anecdotes from their daily lives, or to share memories of extraordinary events. The game is a fun way to strengthen existing connections by encouraging people to get to know each other better, maybe even bridging gaps between generations.

The primary target group for the application consists of seniors and their (grand-) children, but other groups are also viable, for example friends and student societies.

The game concept was tested in Finland, Sweden and Denmark this spring in six evaluation workshops. The seniors, as well as their children and grandchildren, who took part in the workshops found the game to offer excellent tools, for example in getting to know each other better.

When playing the game, players sit around a table. A tablet (iPad), functioning as game board, is passed on between players during the game. This way, the players are able to watch the same media item together and interact with the photographs presented. Ideally, there's a transformation from individual to collective, from private to public, from self to the others.

The game will be developed further based on the feedback from the players. Aspects to

explore further are:

• The balance between competition and collaboration
• Scoring points versus collecting stories or media
• Building new stories out of the collected material (and publishing them online?)

In the future, community aspects will also be investigated so as to foster interest-based connections between seniors as well as enable new connections (game creation, story telling and story crafting). Imagine seniors creating content for the game themselves, based on the cities they live in, on their favourite pastimes, favourite holiday destinations etc. – and sharing the content online.

What's next?

Waag Society has now incorporated the feedback from evaluation workshops into new usage cases. A usage case is a description of how the users play the game and how they interact with the iPad as well as other players. Based on these descriptions, Waag Society has added two more games, which now total in five. At the moment, software developers are working on small prototypes, each with some additional interaction towards the game. In September, Waag Society started to developing the prototype in full. During the development, several usability tests will be done to ensure the user friendliness for the future customers. We will tell more about this process in our next issue of Express to Connect Newsletter.

The world of the Ambient Assisted Living gathered this year in Lecce, Italy, during September 26th to 28th. The Forum serves as an information and discussion platform on innovative and advanced solutions for independent ageing. It also represents a meeting place for stake holders, scientists and users in Europe. The E2C project was presented under track B by Sabine Wildevuur and Thomas Hammer-Jakobsen.

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