# Remembering Rituals of Remembrance: Capturing Xantolo through SenseCam

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## ABSTRACT

Xantolo is a Mexican tradition in which deceased loved ones are celebrated and honoured through their re-enactment. In this paper, we outline a proposed project in which we intend to capture first-person perspectives of Xantolo via a wearable camera, SenseCam. This should give rise to a number of outcomes. Firstly, it will involve the creation of a novel record of Xantolo by capturing a first-person perspective. Secondly, it will allow participants of the event to reflect upon its practices in a different social context, hopefully allowing insights to be gained into its various rituals. Finally, the project allows the possibility of reflecting upon a deceased relative by re-visiting their re-enactment, a process that is somewhat specific to Xantolo, but that may nevertheless inspire the design of interactive systems for more general remembrance.

## Author Keywords

Reflection, memory, mortality, death, tradition, preservation, photography, Day of the Dead.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## INTRODUCTION

Shifts in the field of HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) coupled with the growing maturity of interactive technologies is leading researchers and designers to consider issues relating to mortality. At a fundamental level, such issues are becoming increasingly prominent as technology companies decide how to handle email accounts or webpages belonging to people who are now deceased. More subtly though, HCI practitioners are starting to

consider how interactive systems can be sensitively designed to support end-of-life practices, the means with which digital media are dealt with following death, processes of grieving, and rituals of remembrance. For example, Massimi and Charise [8] introduce the concept of thanatosensitivity, highlighting the need to both acknowledge and engage with topics such as mortality, dying and death in HCI.

In this paper, we outline our plans for a future project in which a particular set of Mexican rituals, involving remembering but also the re-enactment of the dead, might be digitally captured and used as a tool for reflection. Most straightforwardly, the proposed research will serve as a means of capturing the rituals in question, which are gradually disappearing as the local population that upholds them becomes increasingly mobile. This is interesting in itself, but the project also offers an opportunity for the participants involved in those rituals to reflect upon them afterwards, using the digital record as a tool to revisit events. Furthermore, as the rituals involve a degree of re-enacting the deceased, the project provides an interesting opportunity to explore this performative approach to honouring and remembering the dead.

As the project is in its initial stages, in this paper we will simply give a brief outline of the rituals in question and the technology with which we intend to capture them. As such, we will use the following two sections to explain something of the festivities of Xantolo and to outline previous work using SenseCam, before concluding with our research questions.

## XANTOLO

The festivities of Xantolo are marked every year in the town of San Martín Chalchicuautla in México. They are associated with a Mexican tradition, more widely known as the Day of the Dead, in which deceased family members are honoured through various rituals that take place on the 2nd of November. Examples of these rituals include picnics held over tombs, at which the deceased are served plates of food, and altars that are constructed to represent what the deceased found enjoyable while living. In the case of Xantolo, the festivities also feature an element of enacting

the dead, a tradition that is tied to the notion that the deceased are brought back to life. The men of the town, known as *Huehues*, dress up as their relatives and engage in activities thought to have brought them pleasure, which typically comprise dancing and consuming alcohol.

Xantolo is exclusive to this region of México, and its performative aspects are sustained through their annual enactment by the local population. However, the tradition is gradually disappearing as the locals migrate to urban areas. In an attempt to preserve something of it, CANTE (Centre for the Arts and New Technologies) has been working on an artistic project that aims to document the festival, primarily through photography (see Figure 1). However, this approach can only capture the festival as experienced by an outsider; it cannot portray the view of those who take an active role within it. In this project, we hope to complement the work currently being undertaken by CANTE by using a wearable camera that will allow the perspective of the participants to also be documented. The camera in question, SenseCam, has been used for a range of research purposes, as will now be explained.



**Figure 1. A CANTE photo depicting aspects of the festivities of Xantolo.**

## SENSECAM

SenseCam [3] is a small automatic camera with a wide-angle lens, which may be worn around one's neck using a lanyard (see Figure 2). When turned on, it takes photos at frequent intervals and in its default mode will capture around 3000 images a day. The taking of photos is triggered by the activity of built-in sensors: an accelerometer, a passive infrared sensor, a temperature sensor and a light sensor. While SenseCam itself does not have any means of displaying images back to the user, these can be downloaded onto a computer and viewed using a dedicated piece of software. This allows photos to be played back at varying speeds, and enables the viewer to bookmark and label sequences of interest.

SenseCam was created as a lifelogging tool, so as to allow a record of each day to be generated. While much of the research associated with it has focused on supporting people with clinical memory deficiencies [3], or automatically organising the large amounts of images that it produces [4], some work has focused on the potential of the device to serve as a novel form of photography [5, 7], as a way of eliciting narratives about everyday life [6], or as a means of engendering reflections on experience [1, 2]. In the current project, the latter aspects of SenseCam usage are of greatest interest. As already mentioned, this is a project with artistic aspects, which might draw on the time-lapse aspects of SenseCam image streams. However, of more relevance to the workshop in question is the potential to use these images as the basis for discussions about the experience of Xantolo, and furthermore, about the deceased themselves. Thus, the literature on using SenseCam photos as a tool for both reminiscence and reflection seems of most relevance here.



**Figure 2. SenseCam.**

Interestingly, while research does suggest that SenseCam can enhance memory, at least where memory is impaired [3], there is also evidence to indicate that for people with no memory loss SenseCam images may be more effective in providing a means of *knowing* about the past than they are for eliciting a state of real *remembering* [9]. This distinction between knowing and remembering suggests that while SenseCam images might allow people to understand what has happened in their past, the potential for them to trigger actual memories may decay with general forgetting. If this is the case, the viewing of SenseCam images may be associated with a certain distancing from the event in question; the past is recognised or can be identified, but it is not necessarily re-experienced. Of course, this is not to say that SenseCam images never trigger memories; if memory for an event has not faded, then the experience of remembering it may well be elicited by viewing the photos. Furthermore, even the simple act of identifying aspects of the past from an image stream might be sufficient to trigger

narratives about the photos, and allow past experiences to be re-explored.

Investigations of the capacity of SenseCam to support narratives about and reflection on the past have been undertaken through various field studies, which have explored the ways in which SenseCam photos are experienced in more routine situations. The emphasis in this work is not on the re-living of the past, but on how past events might be re-interpreted according to social context [6] and how they might offer an opportunity for reflection [2]. Much of this research has emphasised a distinction between the visual portrayal of one's activities through SenseCam and the ways in which those activities are actually remembered, highlighting the impact of the camera's fish-eye lens, the capture of images from chest-height, and the different portrayal of time associated with SenseCam image streams. Such factors have been suggested as being particularly effective in encouraging reflection on the activities and routines of daily life, and the apparent affinity of SenseCam images to engender reflective behaviours has been drawn on further in explorations of the camera's use in professional contexts, such as teacher training [1]. This potential is one that we might draw on further in our study of the experience of and reflections upon Xantolo, as we will now propose.

## XANTOLO VIA SENSECAM

This project is intended to serve as a way of creating a digital record of Xantolo before the tradition disappears, captured from the perspective of its participants. The documentation is to include discussions with Huehues about the rituals of the festival, which will be grounded in the activity of looking at SenseCam photos. These discussions will be held soon after the event; consequently the images are likely to trigger memories and to allow some re-experiencing of what occurred. However, the act of discussing the images is also likely to present an opportunity for reflection on both the event and on the deceased person that has been enacted. Furthermore, the social context in which the photos are encountered is likely to be quite different to that in which they were captured, having little of the spirit of festivity that characterises Xantolo itself. As such, the project offers an opportunity that goes beyond simply documenting Xantolo: it should offer both a unique insight into the nature of the rituals undertaken by the Huehues, as well as potentially prompting more specific and personal reflections on the act of reliving a particular relative as a way of honouring them.

The project is to be undertaken during the Xantolo festival of 2010; hence we will conclude this paper by highlighting the research aims that we intend to address in this work. The questions that are of most relevance to the current workshop are as follows:

*How might capturing Xantolo via SenseCam offer new insights into rituals for remembering and honouring the dead?*

As Xantolo is a rather unique event (hence the desire of CANTE to record it), the rituals that are associated with it may offer some inspiration to HCI practitioners designing technologies for users to honour their loved ones, as well as throwing up ideas for preserving such rituals through the use of technology.

*How might the process of looking back at the images of Xantolo in a different social context support reflection on the experience of participating in the event?*

The celebratory element of Xantolo offers a contrast to many other rituals surrounding the deceased, in which the mood is somewhat more sober. Re-visiting Xantolo in a social context that lacks this celebratory element may allow an insight into how the festivities impact the ways in which the dead are remembered, while also allowing other emotions to be expressed.

*How might the process of looking back at these images also support remembrance of and reflection on the deceased person that has been enacted?*

The first-person perspective offered by SenseCam will allow the way in which Xantolo was experienced by individual Huehues to be explored. Furthermore, the record that is created is likely to elicit reflection on both the day itself and on the deceased. This may inspire design ideas to support reflection on the dead, by allowing a fuller understanding of whether and how the rituals of Xantolo elicit reflections during the festivities, and how these may differ to reflective behaviours that are engaged in under other circumstances.

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