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*Published in:*  
CHI'18

*DOI:*  
[10.1145/3170427.3186547](https://doi.org/10.1145/3170427.3186547)

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Herron, D., Moncur, W., Curi, M., Grubiši, D., Vištica, O., & van den Hoven, E. (2018). Digital Possessions in the Museum of Broken Relationships. In *CHI'18 : Extended Abstracts of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* [D203] (Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings; Vol. 2018-April). Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3170427.3186547>

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# Digital Possessions in the Museum of Broken Relationships

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## Abstract

This paper describes an interactive demo of our collaborative research activity with the Museum of Broken Relationships, one of Lonely Planet's 'Fifty Museums to Blow Your Mind'. In collaboration with the Museum, we are currently collecting data worldwide and cross-culturally on the digital possessions individuals associate with their romantic break up, combined with the stories behind those possessions.

Taking a methodologically innovative approach, we adapt the Museum's existing practices to conduct research (triangulating existing small-scale interview data) whilst simultaneously generating a new collection for the Museum. In doing so, we foreground contemporary HCI questions of ownership, curation, and presentation of self after a romantic breakup to the public. The demo will exhibit the digital possessions and associated stories that we collect, whilst also giving the CHI community the opportunity to contribute to the collection in real-time at the conference, by sharing digital possessions and stories of their own romantic breakups.

## Author Keywords

Museum; collaboration; relationship; break up; separation; digital possessions; collection; curation; exhibition; grammars of action; methodology.



Figure 1: A 'key bottle-opener' from the Museum's physical exhibition: *'You talked to me of love and presented me with small gifts every day; this is just one of them. The key to the heart. You turned my head; you just did not want to sleep with me. I realized just how much you loved me only after you died of AIDS.'*

<https://brokenships.com/explore/a-key-bottle-opener>



Figure 2: The 'toaster of vindication' from the Museum's physical exhibition: *'When I moved out, and across the country, I took the toaster. That'll show you. How are you going to toast anything now?'*

<https://brokenships.com/explore/the-toaster-of-vindication>

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.1.2 [Models and Principles]: User/Machine Systems – Human factors; K.4 [Computing Milieux]: Computers and Society.

## Introduction

Partners enacting romantic relationships in a digital context typically create and collect a number of digital possessions associated with their relationship [3]. When they experience a relationship break up, they often take steps to manage or curate these digital possessions as part of the process of moving on [4]. Over the past four years, Herron, Moncur, and van den Hoven have been developing an understanding of the role of digital possessions during and after relationship break up, with participants aged from 18 to 52 years old who had been involved in traditional and non-traditional relationship types [2–4,6]. We use the term 'digital possessions' to refer to the many different types of digital materials that belong to an individual, including images, videos, chat histories, social media posts, meta-data, text messages, and more [4,8,9]. 'Relationship break up' refers here to the end of both formalised (e.g., civil partnership, marriage) and non-formalised (e.g., cohabiting, dating) relationships.

In parallel, but distinct from these research activities, the *Museum of Broken Relationships* in Zagreb, Croatia, have been collecting, curating, and exhibiting *physical* possessions linked with relationship break up [12]. The Museum's collection is 'a group of possessions with very particular characteristics' [10], crowd-sourced from contributors across the world. Contributors send a material possession symbolic of the end of their romantic relationship to the museum, accompanied by the story of that possession. Artefacts and stories in the

Museum's physical collection range from the deeply affecting (e.g., 'A key bottle-opener' Fig. 1) to the amusing (e.g., 'The toaster of vindication' Fig. 2), and the somewhat alarming (e.g., 'An Ex Axe' Fig. 3). The Museum is listed as one of the world's '50 Museums to Blow Your Mind' [1].

This demo showcases collaboration between the researchers (Herron, Moncur, van den Hoven) and the Museum, which simultaneously elicits research data as well as content for a new collection of digital possessions in the Museum. It builds on our previous research around relationship dissolution in a digital context, augmenting interview studies through an online data collection activity conducted across a global network of participants.

## Data Collection and Exhibition

The Museum of Broken Relationships has an established website through which they have sought material content across the world for their exhibitions. Together, we have launched our *Digital Separations Collection* [12]. Participants are asked to contribute one 'submission' made up of a *digital* possession that is symbolic of their relationship ending, and an accompanying personal narrative to describe it. They are also asked to give a brief description of their past relationship (in 140 characters), plus demographic information such as age, gender identity, nationality, duration of the relationship, and time since break up. Participants are then asked to give their submission a title before uploading it. Stories are defined for participants as: *'Your own creation, your personal confession, the display caption accompanying the item you are entrusting us with or a pinned text on our world map. Be frank, withdrawn, furious, imaginative,*



Figure 3: An 'ex-axe' from the Museum's physical exhibition. Proclaimed as a 'therapy instrument' by its owner, the axe was used as a physical outlet for emotional pain. To view the full story of this possession, visit: <https://brokenships.com/explore/an-exe-axe>

*witty, or sad. Through your story, you create the museum display – the story is your stage.'*

The data gathered will be simultaneously used to collect research data and to generate a new collection for the Museum. This approach is methodologically innovative, extending the established practices used to collect, curate, and display material artefacts and associated narratives by the Museum into the digital realm, and simultaneously producing cross-cultural, large-scale triangulation of research findings from our past small-scale interview studies.

The resulting museum exhibition will be physical (in Zagreb, Croatia) and virtual. It will act both as a traditional exhibition (displaying a collection to an audience) and as an exhibition in the sense that participants will exhibit an aspect of their performed identity [5] (their response to relationship breakup) through their submission, which will be seen by Museum visitors worldwide. The process of contributing to this type of research has also proven cathartic for participants experiencing loss in other sensitive contexts [7]. By engaging with an international audience of research participants and Museum visitors, we are introducing them to issues inherent to breaking up in a digital age (such as ownership, curation, and presentation of self [3,4,6]), thereby engaging the public seamlessly in topical HCI issues.

### **Demo: Digital Separations Collection at CHI**

The demo that we will exhibit at CHI 2018 is in two parts. (1) CHI attendees will be able to interact with the demo by contributing to the Digital Separations Collection in real-time, via a laptop set up as part of the installation or (more privately) through their own

device; (2) anonymised submissions from the Collection, including those made by CHI attendees, will be displayed through a set of three projections (Fig. 4). The central projection will display full submissions. Viewers will be shown one digital possession at a time and be able to read the associated story in full, before



Figure 4: A rendering of the demo showing the projections moving on to the next submission. The left- and right-hand projections will display randomly selected digital possessions moving across them, drawing attention to the demo and hinting at the stories that will appear on the central projection, but not providing any contextual information about them. Our approach is inspired by 'Would You Mind?', a research study on sexual behavior which was part of the Wellcome Collection's *Institute of Sexology* exhibition [11]. In that study, visitors to the exhibition were asked to complete a survey, whilst a digital display showed the previous day's candid responses to open questions.

CHI attendees who contribute to the Collection will be offered a ribbon to attach to their name-badge (see Fig. 5), should they choose to share the knowledge that they contributed to the demo. We anticipate that this



Figure 5: The design of a name-badge ribbon given to those who contribute to the demo at the conference

will generate a sense of intrigue and fun about the demo, with the ribbons acting as a novel 'icebreaker' at CHI social events.

### Summary

Our contribution in this demo is to (1) illustrate our methodological innovation in simultaneously eliciting research data as well as input to the Museum's new Collection; (2) showcase the prototype exhibition for the Digital Possessions Collection at the Museum of Broken Relationships; and (3) promote reflection on digital possessions in the aftermath of a romantic breakup, continuing the ongoing discussion within the HCI community around ownership, curation, and presentation of self [2–4,6].

### Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all Digital Separations Collection contributors. Thanks also to Zhen Ge for the illustrations in Figures 4 and 5 in this paper. Herron's PhD research is supported by an EPSRC DTP.

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