Bio:
Dr. William Odom is a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University.
His work has appeared at venues including the ACM CHI, DIS, Ubicomp, and CSCW conference proceedings, where it has received four best paper awards and three best paper honorable mentions. His work on the Technology Heirlooms project in collaboration with Microsoft Research received a silver international design excellence award (IDEA) for design research from the Industrial Designers Society of America. He holds a Ph.D. in Human-Computer Interaction from the School of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University. Prior to his doctoral study, he was a Fulbright Scholar in the design department at Griffith University Queensland College of Art in Brisbane, Australia. He is an avid and long-time rock climber at the New River Gorge.

Abstract:
People's practices of accumulating, collecting, and interacting with material possessions play important roles in providing a sense of who they were, who they are, and who they wish to become. Many disciplines have investigated how people form and sustain attachments to their material possessions. Yet, as interactive technologies have become embedded in everyday life, the “things” that matter to us are increasingly digital. People's practices have expanded and today they are amassing ever-larger and diverse collections of virtual possessions. I characterize virtual possessions as former material things that are becoming immaterial (e.g., music, photos); things that never had a lasting material form (e.g., electronic message archives); and also metadata traces that document people's interactions with digital devices and services (e.g., music play histories, photo location information).

Virtual possessions offer potentially valuable resources for capturing vast, rich records of people's life experiences. However, wide-ranging experiences of overload and loss of control are emerging as people's virtual archives rapidly grow and become more diverse. Interactive systems are being developed without a clear sense of how people could develop lasting interactions with their virtual possessions, and how this might complicate their longer-term goals and values. These effects threaten the ability for virtual possessions and interactive technologies to be valuable resources for meaning making activities like reminiscence, social connection, and contemplation of the future. On a broader level, little is known about how people experience virtual possessions as a class of artifact, how they can differ from material things, and what they could become in the future. How is the growing presence of virtual possessions and interactive technology in everyday life currently mediating people's meaning-making activities? How can we advance current design processes to create new technologies that enable virtual possessions to more appropriately participate in and support the meaningful activities of people's lives?

I investigate these questions through an approach combining qualitative field research with insights into future technological states rooted in Research through Design. In this talk, I offer an overview of field research I have conducted with nearly two hundred participants at sites across Asia, Europe, and North America to surface a higher-level set of qualities that help understand factors shaping how people experience their virtual possessions. They are placelessness, spacelessness, and formlessness; each paradoxically generate and complicate opportunities for digital possessions to become valuable resources. I will then discuss several of my projects investigating slow interaction design as a strategy for radically reforming interactive technology and virtual possessions into more valued, longer-term resources in people’s everyday lives. I will conclude a brief overview of research opportunities and methodological implications that my work suggests for creating novel interactive systems that could enable people to reclaim the meaningfulness of their virtual possessions over time and into the future.

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