

Digital Memory Aids Remember When You Don't

Ever wish you could go back to a certain time in your life? Maybe you'd like to re-experience some event from your past, such as the moment you were offered your dream job or when you landed the account that resulted in your promotion.

Researchers are getting closer to perfecting a program that could bring you back to any point in your life, whenever

you'd like. No, you don't need a ride in a futuristic machine for time traveling. All you need to do is boot up your computer.

Two researchers, Gordon Bell (a senior researcher at Microsoft Corp.) and Sunil Vemuri (co-founder of Qtech, Inc.), have spent the past few years creating separate computer memory aids. They both devised software to digitally store important artifacts from a person's life.

While Bell's project is more of an all-encompassing file of any material, conversation, and idea, Vemuri's is on a smaller scale, focusing on audio recordings of communications.

The idea of documenting life's moments is not new. Bell said that people have been doing this in the physical form for years. "They are called files, shoeboxes, bios, autobiographies, photo albums, di-

aries, file cabinets, etc.," he said. But his MyLifeBits software program creates a digital record of these materials, letting users access their memories or search for a specific item at any time.

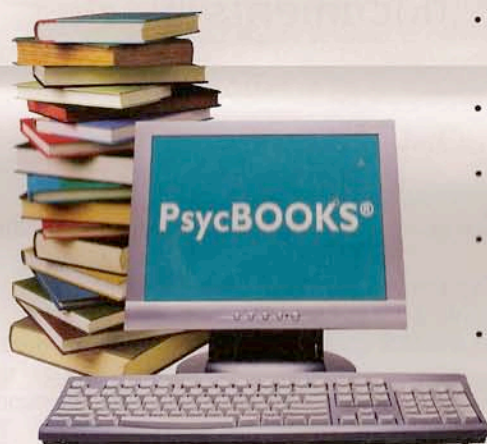
Users can customize what goes into the program, adding as little or as much as they like. Eventually, the computer will be able to detect certain details. "Over time, a lot more will be automatic—[e.g.,] every camera will add where the picture was taken, and eventually computers will be able to label the faces in photos," said Bell.

Vemuri's project (What Was I Thinking?) transforms everyday communications devices (e.g., cell phones, PDAs, smartphones) into memory aids. Users can record conversations on the device; the computer program uses speech recognition to convert the audio to text, according to Vemuri. "Once transcribed, the text becomes searchable just like you can search for web sites on the Internet."

Deliver a New Wealth of Research With...

PsycBOOKS®

Full-Text Scholarly Titles and Classic Books from APA and Other Publishers



- More than 600 quality APA scholarly titles up to 2005, covering basic research as well as applied, clinical, and theoretical studies
- Nearly 500 classic books from as early as the 1800s
- Nearly 18,000 individual chapters in PDF from authored and edited books
- Entire APA *Encyclopedia of Psychology*—the definitive reference compendium for the discipline
- PsycINFO abstracts and indexing for easy, accurate searching

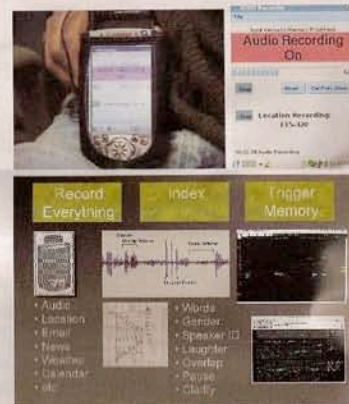
Now Available for Institutional Site License on APA PsycNET® and Other Major Vendors

Sign Up for an Institutional Free Trial —
And Save 15%* on the APA Data Fee!

Let your library's users experience the research value of instant access to an authoritative library of scholarly and scientific books. Register at www.apa.org/freetrials using **Promotional Code 140** for a free trial on APA PsycNET or your choice of vendors. Current or new PsycINFO or PsycARTICLES customers who license PsycBOOKS during the trial period save 15%* off the published APA data fee for the first year of a new PsycBOOKS license.

www.apa.org/psycbooks

*Offer valid for a limited time only. Prices are subject to change without notice.



According to the project description on Vemuri's Web site, "The computer attempts to determine the most important parts within the audio recordings. The analyses include trying to determine who was speaking, if it was a calm discussion or a heated argument, and if there were funny parts." The program also selects a brief clip of the recording to serve as a memory trigger of the event.

While Bell's project attempts to acquire a great deal of information, Vemuri's is more selective. "[C]apturing life experiences is a valuable step towards helping remedy everyday memory problems. Being able to selectively capture life's more-salient experiences can have overall memory benefits compared to capturing everything," he said.

Of course, when dealing with data stored on hard drives, the risk always exists about security issues such as hacking or viruses wiping out information. Still, Bell thinks the digital files can outlast the physical forms, which can fall victim to fires, water damage, or wear-and-tear over time. "Everyone forgets. When describing my research to people, the most common response I get is, 'I could use that.'"

—Jamie Babbitt