Enhancing User Interactive Experience Through Diasporic Reception

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the notion of interactivity and how ideas from outside the field of interaction design can expand the understanding and application of interactivity. Interactivity is generally seen as the user's ability to easily access information. For certain writers and practitioners, however, the idea of interactivity extends to user's capacity to shape content and meaning to extend the range of experience in digital media contexts. Using a combination of theoretical discussion, the research explores the second perspective, proposing a mode of interactivity that supports user's capacities for reflexivity and intervention. In the wake of poststructuralism, computer and digitally networked technologies are seen to challenge traditions of stable, a priori authorship by allowing users to construct meaning from the range of available content. Anthony Giddens's writings on human reflexivity support the idea of the 'knowledgeability' of human agents, that is, their capacity to understand the nature of their circumstances and to act upon them. Theories of diasporic reception argue that visualities produced by diasporic individuals reveal critical reflexivity in the mixing of cultural meanings and materials. The research draws on these ideas to suggest the importance of allowing users to experience autonomy, agency and self-determination in digital media contexts.

Keywords: interactivity, digital media, knowledgeability, diasporic reception, agency

INTRODUCTION

Most new media programs promise a high level of interaction and a richness of experience, ranging across animation, graphics, music, sound, text and video. The concept of interaction covers the connection between interface, content, computer and user. Implicit in its meaning is the idea of reciprocal exchange between users and content, suggesting that one will have an effect on the other and vice versa. For the majority of digital media designers, however, successful interactivity comes when design elements enhance browsing experience and access to content. According to Carrie Heeter, for example, design should make interaction an easy rather than a difficult process (Heeter 2003). Although clarity of meaning, accessibility and ease of use are important elements of interaction design perhaps the real promise of interactivity lies in its unpredictable dimensions. Interactivity can represent an open, creative process of content engagement. Navigation systems, for instance, should not force users into a path-following, choice-making state of mind. This represents a loss of self and limits the range of unfolding, on-screen possibilities. By contrast, Nathan Shedroff contends that the ability to formulate new content or new ways of interacting with content is critical to adding a creative dimension to the interactive experience (Shedroff 1999). As technology develops it is likely that many more dimensions of interactivity will become available, allying multimedia products more closely to human creative and conceptual capacities. Moreover, the pace and scale of change in information and communication technologies, combined with the possibility and complexity that comes with media convergence, suggest that although the nature of future technology resists prediction, designers must constantly reflect on their approach to interaction if they wish to harness design to emerging technological capabilities and human needs.

Presently, the fields of usability testing and computer studies, especially Human Computer Interfaces (HCI), dominate investigations into interaction and interface design, using empirical methods to understand user's reactions to interface design and to test the effectiveness of specific products. These fields favour the stringent analysis of phenomena without the intrusion of enquirer's subjective judgments.

The rise of scientific methodology in modern, technocratic society has given rise to the tendency to dismiss anything that cannot be open to empirical scrutiny, including aesthetic principles, emotional responses and taste preferences. The broad consequences of this have been the creation of putative rules for interaction design, which insist that designers keep things as simple as possible in the design of the graphical user interface (GUI). Recently, designers including Nathan Shedrofff and John Lenker have advanced the idea of 'experience design', arguing that for design to be effective as mass communication it must offer more than simple, practical approaches to the presentation of information in a digital context by satisfying audiences at an aesthetic, emotional and social level (Lenker 2002). Designer's capacity to invent alternative models of interaction and interface design could open up new possibilities in the use and experience of information technology in an age where knowledge is a vital commodity and society regards the capacity to identify, create and apply useful knowledge as crucial skills.

In seeking to understand the potential of interaction design it is vital not to simply fix and control it, thereby limiting the range of human experiences and capacities in the digital realm. This paper explores how interaction design can create the conditions which allow individuals to experience new levels of engagement with content, shifting the focus from path finding and selection to the user's ability to create content and meaning. It brings multi-disciplinarity to the discussion of interaction design, believing that to develop new design possibilities it is necessary to 'think outside the box' and challenge existing paradigms. Although interactivity should continue to provide effective paths and comprehensible information structures it should also prioritize models that generate meaningful experiences and empower users.

INTERPRETATIVE AUTONOMY AND DIGITAL MEDIA DESIGN

My interest in the interpretative autonomy of users evolved from the idea that audiences, rather than senders, construct meaning. According to Roland Barthes' classic essay 'The Death of the Author', writing transcends the author, focusing on the reader's response, rather than the author's intentions. (Barthes 1977). A founding statement of postmodernism, 'The Death of the Author' overturned common understanding of cultural texts by encouraging open interpretation. Barthes' essay encapsulated many ideological dimensions, arguing that an author is not an integral "person" but a subject, constituted through society and history, which does not exist, outside language. He maintained it is writing—itself a product of society, history and ideology—that makes the author. On this point, Barthes wrote, "The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings ... in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (Barthes 1977). Many see the interactive hypermedia environment as realizing Barthes' radical agenda, which liberates meaning from the tyranny of singular authorship. A reader's capacity to follow individual paths, through text and information, which do not conform to linear order, mirrors the way reading affects writing; allowing the user to so engage, suggests empowerment.

Poststructuralism sees meaning as generated within language, which symbolically constructs the reality we experience from a storehouse of existing meanings. Judith Butler describes this conception of language as a process of reiteration (Butler 1993). She accepts that in speaking or writing individuals conform to established meanings, and other rules and conventions of language, reinforcing the semantic construction of the world and the speaking subject. While the subject does not create meaning, and is largely an effect of the language practices used when speaking or writing, Butler identifies the possibility that new or changed meanings emerge in the process. For Butler, reiteration incorporates inherent

contextual shifts of meaning through the specific combinations of meanings and the temporal and social context in which reiteration occurs. She argues that the process of reiteration slowly but inescapably changes meanings, resulting in the continual renovation of language as old meanings adjust and new meanings emerge. For Butler the transformation of language derives from the fact that it is a social system in continuous use, the iteration of meaning through time and space molding the sense of things in ways that nobody can control or predict.

Rethinking interactivity involves developing an expanded concept of receptivity in new media communication. British social theorist, Anthony Giddens' 1984 book *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* offers ideas for rethinking the nature and process of interaction, as well its design concepts and strategies. Giddens emphasizes the capacity of social agents for self-reproduction, self-transformation and self-deconstruction (Giddens 1984). His primary contention is that social patterns and structures do not exist, outside of individual agents, who continually reproduce or change them, making them simultaneously enabling and constraining. He emphasizes the active and reflexive characteristics of human conduct, stressing that in modern society, individuals and institutions encompass high reflexivity. Giddens' theory of modernity sees qualities of reflexivity informing the knowledgeability of human agents, monitoring self-action and correcting self-behavior, which depends on consciousness of complex social relations when judging or adjusting actions (Giddens 1984). For Giddens, this was extended to the way we construct ourselves.

Communications studies, which explores the way users negotiate the media of the World Wide Web through hyperlinks, also advances ideas of active readership and user agency, suggesting that browsing behavior should not be viewed as a passive process. For example Joyce (1995) defines hypertext as a medium that 'embodies information and communications, artistic and affective constructs, and conceptual abstractions alike into symbolic structures made visible on a computer-controlled display'. While these qualities may be implicit in the process of negotiating linked content interaction design has a clear role to play supporting users to initiate a whole range of actions, to structure their own paths following their interests, affecting the unfolding of events.

DIASPORIC RECEPTION

So far I have argued that Roland Barthes's idea of the illusory nature of authorship, Judith Butler's idea that iteration inevitably and inexorably shifts meaning, and Anthony Giddens's idea that individuals have the capacities of reflexivity to understand and act upon the structures they encounter in life, suggest the potential for an expanded view of interactivity in new media contexts. Even though these ideas are not addressed to the subject of interaction and interface design they have challenged me to formulate the fundamental proposition of this research, that to fulfill the promise of interactive multimedia (IMM) products should facilitate diverse modalities of meaning and experience.

Feminist, post-colonial and other theories of identity have valorized the critical and imaginative power of decentered subjectivity. Theories of diasporic reception argue that social and cultural context are basic frameworks of meaning, the translocation of cultural materials across boundaries of space, time, race, culture, language and history actively disrupting meaning. For Kate McFarlane, diasporic experience incorporates qualities of syncretic visuality that 'are multiperspectival and frame-breaking and exist in that provisional and productive site of diasporic in-betweenness.' (McFarlane 2004) She suggests that the reading of culture from different temporal and geographic locations involves the grafting and juxtaposing of multiple modes of visuality. In addition, she argues that 'this syncretic diasporic intervisuality often displays, through its intercultural mixing of modes of visuality, an attitude of irony and critique as regards the relations that exist between power, visuality, ethnicity and nationalism.' (McFarlane 2004) The 'multiperspectival' operations of diasporic cultural reception incorporate a reflexive or creative dimension that shifts ways of seeing and reading cultural objects because the subject is inclined to patterns of interpretation and identification grounded in dialectics of past and present, here and there. The reception of cultural texts particular to diasporic negotiations of cultural identity and meaning reflects the increasing fragmentation and dispersal of points of reference in an era of globalization. Julia Kristeva, in fact, argues 'we are all in the process of becoming foreigners in a universe that is being widened more than ever, that is more than ever heterogeneous beneath its apparent scientific and media-inspired unity' (Kristeva 1991).

Structuration theory and ideas of diasporic visuality, that is instances of critical looking bound up in seeing things from a different cultural context, describe or-

ders of reception that go well beyond the basic idea that all cultural materials are intertextual because audiences filter them through their different experiences and cultural literacies. In highlighting the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary subjectivity and the critical dimensions of cultural syncretism, theories of diasporic reception challenge new media designers to accept the protean nature of meaning production while embracing the creative agency of users in new media contexts as something positive. Designers may agree in principle that interactivity should support a range of on-screen possibilities that shift the emphasis away from fixed outcomes and offer users the freedom to explore in ways that liberate the intellect and imagination. However, the fundamental challenge is to create designs that allow users to understand interaction as productive, to think consciously about the relationships between linked materials and to visualize the unfolding contours of what might be produced.

RESHAPING MEANINGS IN DIASPORA AND HYPERMEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

In an age of globalization meaning is inevitably negotiated between cultures. Globalization challenges designers to draw on the diverse sources of knowledge and understanding encapsulated in different cultures in order to expand on general understandings of design. In 1985 Eisner raised the idea of 'aesthetic modes of knowing', seeing creative activity as a form of reflective practice that allowed people to make sense of things. Diasporic visuality may be a prime example of the effects that Eisner writes of, the work of diasporic visual artists revealing a capacity to reconstitute culture and meaning in critical ways. According to McFarlane (2004), 'diasporic visuality involves the deployment of tactics such as syncretism, irony, juxtapositioning and intercultural aesthetic cross-hatching which operate collectively to enact both the specificities of diasporic cultural identity and a cultural politics which challenges exclusionary norms of nationalist subjectivity and culture.' McFarlane sees cultural identity as being reconstituted in ways that escape contemporary cultural structures and understandings because of their complex and dynamic nature. Diasporic visuality is embedded in interpretative processes where individuals and communities attempt to understand their identity by negotiating a path between their present circumstances and their cultural roots. Consideration of this showed it was possible to develop a critical relationship to identity and this became intrinsic to the form and content of the project, which aimed for a much richer experience of interaction based around reflexive ways of seeing, knowing and understanding.

As Butler suggests, the iteration of meaning is a continual occurrence in a culture and society that produces new cognitive positions and fresh ways to conceive the world. For Butler, iterative processes draws attention to the absence of essential, natural or ideal categories of meaning prior to each appearance within a causal chain, suggesting only continual shifts between pre-existing categories and new representations (Butler 1997). Postcolonial theory and theories of diasporic visuality challenge the division of the world into simple opposites. Both emphasize the individual and the cultural diversity of diasporic and colonized peoples, suggesting that while such individuals may stand apart as a group from their colonizers or from original populations, they are different one from each other despite their shared pasts, and should not be seen in a singular sense.

McFarlane argues that diasporic intervisuality can produce ironic outcomes, critically reflecting on the relationships between power, visuality, ethnicity and nationalism (McFarlane 2004). The dimension of 'play' challenges traditional ways of seeing and reading in digital media environment, positioning the user as an active producer of content. For McFarlane, diaspora can be experienced both as a dynamic tension and as a space of opening in which issues such as the narratives and visualizations of nation and the politics and stylistic consequences of diasporic interventions into cultural practices can be explored (McFarlane 2004). The potential of interactive multimedia to facilitate multiple viewpoints, double consciousness, differential pathways and in-betweenness is high if designers move beyond the current paradigm of clear communication and efficiency of use, replacing hierarchical patterns of use defined by the designer with interpolating experiences based around provisionality of meaning and the productiveness of users.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has sought to redefine the nature and purpose of interactivity in digital media contexts, principally by thinking about the idea of user power. In this it has drawn substantially on theoretical ideas concerning the reflexivity of social subjects, especially the critical imagination bound up in diasporic visuality. Arjun

Appadurai (Appadurai 1996) characterizes the workings of the contemporary imagination as both a form of labour and a potential conduit for individual resistance, arguing:

No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. (Appadurai 1996)

In an age of mass information and communications, individual acts of the imagination are routinely mediated by digital technology while the use of information and communications technology is more or less synonymous with citizenship in many nations. Developments of this scale reinforce the need for interface and interaction designers to keep pace with social and technological change on at least two levels. At the most basic, *inter*active mediums imply input and effort on the part of the user that product developers need to harness in the most effective ways. The question that I have pursued in this study is whether the empirical concepts of effectiveness delivered to design from the fields of usability and HCI should be supplanted by more complex models of the role of the user that merge consumption with production and understand effectiveness more in the sense of whether the interactive experience is compelling.

In redefining the potential for user agency in IMM contexts, new media designers could do well to take account of evolving concepts of the audience in media studies, where, as Elihu Katz (Katz 1996) argues, New theories of the audience maintain that viewer's add value to what they view. Going far beyond functional theories of media use, they proclaim the competence and creativity of the individual. They suggest that viewers do work—not just by staying awake, but by investing effort, by being critical, by making "public" (Katz 1996). This research has speculated on the potential for this to happen through the theoretical discussion from different field of studies, outlining the current limitations in the understanding of interactivity and then using ideas of critical reflexivity and diasporic visuality to encourage designers to unleash the potential creativity and productivity implied in user interaction processes.

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ENDNOTE

[1] For a more developed discussion of this see Huyssens, 'Back to the Future: Fluxus in Context', in Armstrong and Rothfuss, In the Spirit of Fluxus, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 1993, pp. 140–151.

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