

Chapter XXXI

Applying Bourdieu to eBay's Success and Socio-Technical Design

Rebecca M. Ellis
University of Essex, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his concepts of “the field” and “capital” in relation to eBay. In any given field, there is competition for various sorts of “capital”—power and resources. This chapter considers eBay to be a “field” in its own right—a socio-technical system with its own set of social norms and rules. eBay is used as a case study of the importance of applying a Bourdieuean approach to create successful socio-technical systems. Using a study of eBay users as empirical illustration, this chapter argues that much of eBay’s success is in the affordances for social translucence of eBay’s Web site in supporting the Bourdieuean competition over capital and status. This exploration has implications for socio-technical systems design—in particular, the importance of creating and maintaining socially translucent systems, informed by Bourdieu’s theoretical insights, which support competition for “capital” and status.

...understanding how to design digital systems so that they mesh with human behaviour at the individual and collective levels is of immense importance. By allowing users to... make inferences about the activities of others, to imitate one another, we believe that digital systems can become environments in which new social forms can be invented, adopted, adapted and propagated...

—Erickson and Kellogg (2000, p. 80)

INTRODUCTION

eBay, the 'world's largest personal online trading community', was initially set up in 1995 with collectors in mind. It enabled easier access to collectibles (Bunnell & Luecke, 2000)—where the traditional inefficiencies of person-to-person trading such as geographical fragmentation and imperfect knowledge (*ibid.*) could be offset through computer mediated communication. eBay initially aimed to improve the market liquidity for collectables, which are more problematic to exchange than mass-produced consumer items (Chircu & Kauffman, 2001). But the Internet auction site developed into the way for users to generally establish prices for goods with uncertain values (*cf.* Smith, 1989), including second-hand mainstream items, and later even diversified into selling new and old goods at fixed prices (Zukin, 2004). eBay's success, however, did not alone hinge on making the market more efficient, or creating a platform where items, formerly hidden in limited geographic markets, were made public to the world. Using a two-year qualitative study of eBay users, this chapter argues that a large part of eBay's success is the affordances eBay's Web site offers in terms of supporting various social and cultural actions and practices. It is both a system affording social translucence (Erickson *et al.*, 1999) and 'social navigation' (Dieberger *et al.*, 2000) in relation to 'capital' and status, which contributes to its success. eBay is used here as a case study of the importance of applying a Bourdieuan approach to create successful socio-technical systems. This Bourdieuan approach has implications for wider socio-technical systems and e-commerce design which this chapter will discuss.

'Socially translucent systems' are described as those digitally-based systems which provide social cues which afford accountability, awareness and visibility (Erickson *et al.*, 1999). These social cues in turn allow people to draw upon their expertise and social experience in structuring their interactions with others (Erickson and Kellogg, 2000). Erickson *et al.* (1999) describe certain actions which are possible in socially translucent systems—such as notic-

ing, creating and conforming to social conventions; engaging in peer pressure and imitations of others' actions through observation (*op. cit.*). Of particular relevance for this chapter, Erickson and Kellogg (2000) describe elements of making status socially translucent in terms of knowledge management systems—where systems which make knowledge work visible and reveal skill allow credit to be given to those responsible. Social translucence as a design approach is also articulated in Erickson *et al.* (2002). The 'social' in social translucence refers to providing socially salient cues. Translucence is a term used in preference to 'transparence'—it is not an intention to make all socially salient cues visible, just some of them. Erickson and Kellogg (2000) note a tension between visibility and privacy in such systems. One system of social translucence involves the notion of social proxy, a minimalist form of visualisation of people or their activities (Erickson and Kellogg, 2002). 'Social navigation', in terms of the online world, involves your decisions being informed and guided by information about what other people have been doing online (Dieberger *et al.*, 2000). In relation to eBay, this is particularly important in terms of reputation (*op. cit.*)—other people have been shown to have successful transactions with particular eBay users, and this guides future activity. Wexelblat and Maes (1999) examine navigation in complex information spaces, and highlight the importance of interaction history to guide our actions. In online spaces, problem-solving work by users is said to leave traces which should be accessible to users in the future to make solving problems easier (*op. cit.*). Wexelblat and Maes (1999) suggest that, following Norman (2002), objects that are rich in the history of use acquire new affordances which we can use for new ways of interaction. They describe different sorts of interaction history—knowing what was done, knowing who did it, knowing why it was done and knowing how it was done. These are all important for different reasons in future actions and problem solving—for example the 'who' may be important as the views of domain experts have greater legitimacy as a 'trace' than that of an amateur (*cf.* Dieberger *et al.*, 2000). Internet strategists

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