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The metaphors of virtual worlds

How people make sense of a virtual world via the physical world

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Title: The metaphors of virtual worlds: How people make sense of a virtual world via the physical world

Panel Title: Making Sense of Virtual Worlds as Sites of Innovation in Communication.

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1) What was your research question? What did you want to learn about?

My major project for the virtual worlds research group investigated, through experimental conditions, how relative "virtual world novices" made sense of virtual worlds, and how this sense-making related to their being entertained by engaging with the virtual world, and their subsequent desire to continue engaging. I was especially interested in understanding what people focused on most in their assessments of engaging with a new media product, such as a virtual world. I sought to answer two questions. First, would the people attend most to making sense of the technology, the content, or something else? Second, what previous experiences would they draw upon to help them make sense of this new experience?

In terms of studying sense-making to answer these questions, I align myself most with Dervin's approach -- Sense-Making Methodology (SMM). I have borrowed from Dervin's, in particular, a fundamental metaphor -- that of a person's engaging with a media product as a situation encompassing the human mandate to move through time-space and to in some way habitually or otherwise navigate that movement. Thus, the approach I adopt here is to "map out" the person's sense-making as she or he engages with the content and technology of the media product. All the ups, downs, blockages, whirlpools, et cetera, that we associate with temporal and geographic cartography can be metaphorically depicted to (re)present a person's sense-making processes. Indeed, central to SMM are the metaphors of the gap and the bridge to conceptualize situations. Thus, for this study, I was interested in mapping out the sense-making that occurs in situations of novel media engagements by understanding gaps and bridges.

For this particular presentation, I merged Dervin's approach to metaphorizing as a methodological tool to the theorizations of metaphor developed by Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work on the role of metaphors and metaphorizing in people's lives. Lakoff and Johnson theorize metaphors are a form of analogous rhetoric, a way to make sense of the unknown through the known, and a way of communicating how the person sees one object as standing in for another due to some perceived aspect(s) of similarity. Perceiving as similar usually highlights certain aspects where two entities overlap, while obfuscating those aspects that do not. In the analyses of this study, metaphors were highlighted as people's attempts to draw connections to things they have done in their pasts in the physical world to help them make sense of what they were doing, how they were doing it,

and why they were doing it in the new experience of dealing with a new media technology, virtual worlds. For my purposes, the foundational time-space-movement metaphor drawn from SMM and implemented through SMM interviewing allowed clearer research access to the metaphors of situational and experiential similarities and differences that my research participants used to describe their media engagements.

2) Who did you study -- what type of user -- and what led you to study that type of user?

I chose to investigate novice users of virtual worlds: virtual world technologies and/or specific virtual world media products. I chose to study novices with the assumption that engagements with media products that are "new" in some sense to the participants could entail more sense-making and different types of sense-makings to make sense of the experience.

In the study participants were exposed to specific titles from four types of media products: film, console videogame, MMORPG, and SVW. In this analysis I focus on the two virtual worlds studied; specifically, *City of Heroes*, an MMORPG, and *Second Life*, a SVW. For these two experiences, participants were brought into a laboratory setting. While they were engaging with either virtual world, they were encouraged to vocalize their reactions triggered by the experience via talk aloud protocols. After completing all four experiences, the participants were interviewed using SMM protocols to recall in-depth these experiences and discuss how they related to their everyday lives.

It was my assumption that the artificiality of the experimental framework, combined with the novelty of the experiences, would be most useful for illuminating the sense-making processes involved in engaging with these four media products. Josephs (2000) has discussed the utility of the artificial lab environment "to slow down the meaning-making process in order to gain access to it." (p. 124). Dervin (2008) has discussed how what appears to be, to the observer, a holistic situation can be broken down into "micro-moments" of time-space: in essence, mini-situations embedded in the larger situation. German reception theorists such as Iser (Holub, 1984) have also discussed how there exists "gaps" structured into a text that influence the process, over time, of reading the text. Thus, I theorize that each moment of engaging with a media product could potentially require unique navigatings across time-space -- i.e. unique sense-makings. From an observer's vantage, we may consider the gap in a media reception situation to be some aspect of an outcome we are interested in, such as the media effects that are often studied. However, from the participant's vantage, as the engaging with a media product progresses, there may be moments within the larger situation where a person encounters gaps of myriad kinds, relating to media technology, media content, self, situation, memories, expected events, environmental context, etc. I deliberately chose to have participants' engaging with media products they were unfamiliar with.

SMM assumes that it is in moments of highest discontinuity, there will be greatest (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003). It is my assumption that by having participants engage with media products they are unfamiliar with, there would be the potential for more micro-moments to be experienced, communicated, and discussed.

For my research purposes, I examined each of these gaps drawing on the central SMM metaphor for how the person makes sense of movement through time-space and then I examined how they used metaphors in their own descriptions of the situations and experiences of their media engagements. Of course, in one sense, none of the participants were wholly inexperienced with these media products, in that they had engaged in the past with related media products and had previously heard of the types of media. What was novel for the majority was the exact situation in which they found themselves. And it was those situated sense-making processes that I was particularly interested in studying.

3) How did what and who you studied relate to sense-making, innovation, and communication?

The interviews about the experiences with the virtual worlds were analyzed for metaphors using the Lakoff and Johnson theorization. Metaphors were identified with this structure: "This virtual world or aspect of it is/is like/is similar to this other thing."

According to my analysis, the metaphors most commonly mentioned could be categorized into five types of comparisons. There were metaphors:

- **about physical space/place.** Such as: "I think [Second Life] was very empty. I mean, because compared to the bazaar metaphor, it's kind of crowded and people are all haggling, and, I mean, this is very bare and kind of barren. So it had the feeling of kind of being on a space ship or something like that, I think." - Danika, woman, 35 years old
- **about physical people.** Such as: "So I'm like, I'm like walking like I'm a toddler around in this world where people are trying to kill me. And I'm just like I go, you know, very simply moving around." - Morten, man 27 years old, on *City of Heroes*
- **about physical activities.** Such as: "Although I'm thinking of a possible parallel could be being at a scholarly conference where you don't know anyone and you have to chat people up and you walk up to people at the opening reception or whatever." - Torben, man, 58 years old, on *Second Life*
- **about other technologies.** Such as: "[Second Life] was like a social network basically. Like where you were just walking around in a social network, instead of just, you know, moving around your mouse around Facebook or MySpace or Twitter or whatever they call it." - Morten, man, 27 years old

- **about other content.** Such as: "[City of Heroes] was kind of like a detective story, or something like that, where I had to solve a certain problem and there were clues along the way." - Grette, woman, 54 years old

These results indicate how metaphORIZING appears to be a sense-making process involved in novel engagings. For these novices, metaphORIZING, because it is a connection between the new and the old, seemed to be a way to make sense of these new experiences with a new media technology by seeing connections from something familiar to something unfamiliar. The metaphors being used involved activities, places, people, and objects people have previous experience with or knowledge of in the physical world. This link, perhaps, indicates the strengths and weaknesses of virtual worlds to digitally replicate specific aspects of the physical world. After all, these virtual worlds are not just remediating physical entities (i.e. buildings, people, plants, etc) in these digital spaces: they are also attempting to remediate physical activities. It would appear that the entities and experiences in the virtual worlds, as they were no longer physical or corporally embodied, were the focus of metaphORIZING as a way to help the novices make sense of life in a virtual world via a virtual body. For some a virtual world was successful if it realistically replicated the physical entities, while for other the replication of physical activities was of greater concern for successful engagement with the virtual world.

In regards to the concept of innovation, perhaps the results about how frequently the participants used metaphors when discussing one or the other virtual world is of interest. The novices used metaphors more in discussing their experiences with Second Life, which required more user-driven innovation and thus internal motivation, than in discussing their experiences with City of Heroes. City of Heroes, as a gaming virtual world, has a structure based on gameplay that all the novices were familiar with, even if they were not familiar with the particular structures of MMORPG gameplay. Second Life, on the other hand, being more of an open, user-driven structure, was less familiar. Perhaps being more of an innovation in media engagings, specifically for the purpose of being entertained, the unfamiliarity of Second Life required more metaphORIZING, connecting with the physical world, for it to make sense to the participants.

Finally, in regards to communication, as other theorists have discussed, metaphors can be seen as attempts to communicate the novelty of the experience from the self and to another. That served as a useful perspective for my research purposes here. The metaphors were not only the means through which the participants sought to make sense of their engaging with these virtual worlds. The metaphors were also carriers of information: attempts by the participants to express in the interviews what they had experienced, but perhaps did not have other ways of expressing it. The metaphors had two sense-making functions: to make sense of the experience to the participant, and to make sense of the experience from the participant to the interviewer.

Overall, it would appear that the metaphors used and discussed in this study were integral to how the novices made sense of what is a virtual world, how to engage with a virtual world, and how to communicate about the virtual worlds.

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