

Designing experiences

Everything we do is an experience of some sort. For many of them there is something that makes them worth discussing.



<http://bs.brokensaints.com/intro-website.htm>

Though new and old at the same time, the most important thing for you to understand is:

All experiences are important and that we can learn from them whether they are traditional, physical, online or offline experiences; or whether they are digital, online or technological experiences.

We deal with technology and you must understand that most technological experiences- including digital and especially online experiences- don't hold a candle to the real thing and are unsuccessful as a result.

What you have to know is:

1. What makes a good experience;
2. How to translate these principles;
3. How to manage the technology so it does not dictate the form of the experience.

Experiences are the core of what we do. It is like story. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. What we do looks at it a bit differently. All experiences require:

1. *An attraction;*
2. *An engagement;*
3. *A conclusion.*

Attraction is what initiates the experience. It can be a cognitive, visual or auditory experience of something else that appeals to our senses.

Engagement is the experience itself. It has to be different from the surrounding environment to hold the viewer's attention.

The conclusion is up to you but it must provide some sort of resolution, whether through the story or activity to make the experience enjoyable.

People looking for an experience will choose the media – web, print, broadcast, CD- to meet their needs. For some odd reason CD's and web sites aren't seen as having a compelling need to be interesting simply because they are so novel. What you will find, however, is that the most successful media are those that offer unique experiences and compete with traditional media for usefulness and satisfaction.

We might as well admit it, seduction has always been a part of what we do. Though there are sexual connotations attached to the term there is also the aspect of enticement and appeal. View the interface as an opportunity to seduce people as your effort to enhance their experiences and lives.

What we tend to forget is experiences cross all media and all media experiences are unique to the particular media. New media developers have overlooked this fact, blinded by the sheer novelty of the medium. They don't understand the plain truth that all experiences compete with each other on many levels and many different media.

Think about going to Canada's Wonderland. Can you really recreate the experience of the Drop Zone or Top Gun, the sensory assault of the various shows and attractions and the smells of the various vendors? The experience here is visual, sonic and olfactory. Is there a digital equivalent?



Another way to understand experiences is to identify the different media in which they occur. Do this and it is easy to identify the prominent attributes that differentiate products and media. There are no right answers.

One way of measuring experiences is to qualify them against personal value. The results will be vague because we all attach such different meanings with things. Consider the fact that digital media doesn't have a clue where it will be in six months. Since we can't look ahead to compare current experiences we must look back.

One hundred years ago a pharmacist claimed heroin cleared the complexion, gave buoyancy to the mind, regulates the stomach and bowels and is, in fact a perfect guardian of health. Then again, cocaine was a key ingredient of Coca-Cola before caffeine replaced it.

The experience provided by a Palm is quite a bit different from that provided by a portable computer, ATM or PC Tablet.



“Take Away’s”

The two most important experiences in our lives are birth and death and we all have powerful feelings around both experiences. But why are they so important to us? In his book, *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland talks about a “takeaway”. A takeaway is a memory so powerful that it is the one you will take with you when you die to prove that you were alive.

Takeaways will help you derive meaning from the things you experience. Think of one.

A takeaway is a memory so powerful that it is the one you will take with you when you die to prove that you were alive.

I am willing to bet there is no tech, radio , TV, CD’s or web sites in your takeaway. It may just be that technological experiences are so ubiquitous they have become less important in our lives. Perhaps it is because technological and media experiences are so often reproduced, their specialness is lessened.

The best experiences are transformative. They change people and as such are the absolute best for measuring the value of experience.

One of mine occurred when I was five or six and living on the army base in Kingston. It was a hot July day and we had a sudden torrential downpour. I was in my bathing suit at the time and a friend and I just ran through the rain, splashed in the puddles and glorified in the experience. I can still see slight oil slicks on the puddle, still smell the freshness in the damp air and feel the humidity of the evaporating rain as the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun.



Here’s an example of a transformative takeaway translated to the web. I don’t think any of us will deny watching one’s house slide into the ocean is not a takeaway. Yet this couple are allowing us to share the experience of something we can’t even come close imagining here in Toronto. They do it through words, pictures and even sound.

So your house slides into the ocean. How can you make that information understandable to a group sitting in a classroom thousands of miles away?

It is all in how that information is designed.

Designing Information

Information is nothing more than data transformed into something more valuable by simply adding context around it. In the case of our unfortunates, it is not the diary or the pictures, it is the neighbour's phone call.

Understand something ... by itself, data is meaningless. Understanding though, is a continuum, from data. Along the path from data is an ever increasing value chain of understanding which is derived from an increasing level of context and meaning that becomes more personal and sophisticated as it approaches Wisdom.

The structure of what is designed has meaning and it can not only affect the effectiveness but the meaning of the message. Data can be made to lie by simply rearranging it. This rearrangement alters our understanding of the information. A look at graphs and charts, for example, shows a weakness that is due to a lack of initiative and imagination rather than opportunity or ability.

There is a building in the U.S. that looks like a duck. In this case we don't see it as a house, we see it as a "duck building" and our understanding of a building is altered because the design overpowers the information. To build more effective communications we must experiment much more with the form it might take but always be true to the information as it approaches wisdom.



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We aren't suffering as much from information overload as we are from information anxiety- a lack of context and meaning in our world. It isn't so much as there is more to read but no one has yet shown there is a greater number of meanings to understand than ever before.

How do we deal with that one. Create more insight.

Insight is created as we add context and care about the presentation and organization of the data as well as the needs of the audience. As insight increases, communication with your audience is pushed higher or deeper into the understanding chain.

Above all else remember this, *DATA IS NOT INFORMATION.*

It is the building block upon which relevance is built.

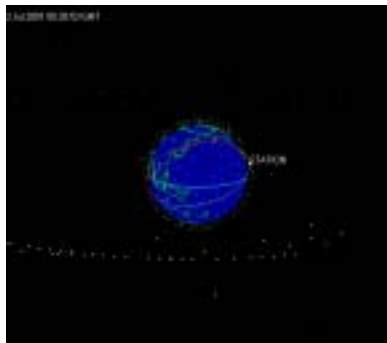
Data needs context for it to become information.



It is only when we put data into context- our personal context- that it becomes information.

Data is so uninforming that it is like wearing our winter clothes. It enshrouds us as we interact with others. It doesn't stop us from communication, but it does make it more difficult.

Here's an online experience that you couldn't have had even ten years ago. Here are all of the satellites currently orbiting the earth. There is no meaning. No synopsis but the glimpse into something we have never considered is powerful.



You can surmise from this that information is the beginning of meaning. Information is data put into context with thought given to its organization and presentation.

Organizing data:

Like data, information can- like our satellite map, be frozen in time. It can be printed in books or found in the tides. However it only has value if we can decode it, speak the language with which it has been encoded and the information hasn't been obscured by interference.

It is important that you understand the organization and presentation of data can profoundly change its understanding. Data can be organized within a very few principles:

Magnitude, Time, Number and alphabet are sequences that allow us to organize things based on similar characteristics shared by all of the data. The last three are easy to understand but rarely have inherent meaning for the data. They are simply easy to use, even though their use is somewhat artificial.

Category and Location do add inherent meaning to the data. These are more qualitative than quantitative; seem to be a more "natural" and less artificial means of data arrangement. They are sometimes considered as two-dimensional models in that data is organized in at least two directions..

Randomness is the lack of organization. It is a great technique to use when building an experience that isn't necessarily easy. Ever played Quake?

Before you bust my chops , lets get clear on the fact that the same organizational method can be presented in several different forms. Let's use Humber's location as the organization for the information. We can use a map to show where it is, we can write out how to get here, we could use a graph, spoken instructions, a series of trail markers. All show where Humber College is located. The organization doesn't change, so the meaning is consistent throughout. What will be the barrier to understanding is the recipient's ability to understand the presentation.

Knowledge is a kind of meta-information that must be understood in a more general way. A definition could be: "Sufficiently generalized solutions gained through experience."

Clearly designed information leads to knowledge and the differences between knowledge and information are difficult to explain. Knowledge isn't just a complex iteration of information. Knowledge is a kind of meta-information that must be understood in a more general way. A definition could be: "Sufficiently generalized solutions gained through experience."

This means knowledge is something that is accessible in many and varied contexts and situations and not merely a description of the details.

It is quite possible wisdom is not attainable until we approach understanding with an openness and tolerance for ambiguity. Since wisdom is so personal a fear or lack of understanding about yourself becomes one of the most extreme roadblocks to becoming wise. Since we are always striving to understand ourselves, this becomes a continuous process that requires we constantly evaluate ourselves as well as our previous understandings.



The most important aspect of any design is how it is understood in the minds of the audience. The most successful designs are those in which the artist and the audience understand the same thing. This concept is called a cognitive model.

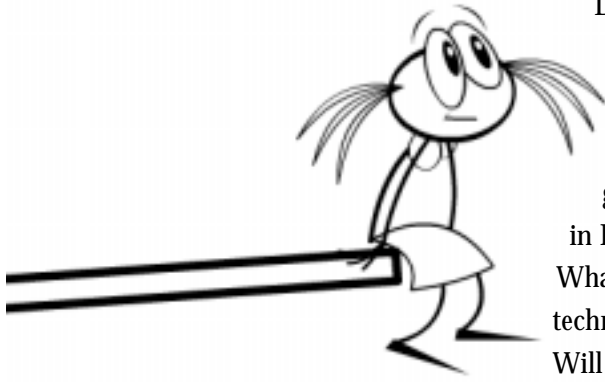
The cognitive model

The most important aspect of any design is how it is understood in the minds of the audience. The most successful designs are those in which the artist and the audience understand the same thing. This concept is called a cognitive model.

Whether or not you focus on a cognitive model for your experience you can be sure your audience will form their own. It might be a mental map of the sequence or process or location. It might be their feelings or merely a randomly strung together list of memories of their experiences.

New cognitive models can often revolutionize an audience's understanding of data, information or an experience by helping them understand and reorganize things they previously understood (or, perhaps, couldn't understand), in a way that illuminates the topic of the experience.

When the subject of digital media was really new, I would start a digital media seminar to newbies that started this way, ' I am going to show you things you know. They are fine. I am going to show you things you don't know. That will be neat. The really great stuff, the stuff that will grab you by the nose hairs and pull you out of your seat is the stuff you did not know that you did not know.' I was letting them know, subtly, that they were about to form new cognitive models of new media and to get set for it.



<http://www.transience.com.au/teetering.html>

David Jones is Australian. Here is an example of his work that underlines my next point when it comes to telling a great story,

The beauty of this piece is drawn from the story. It is a great story of love and romance, with a twist. It is also done in Flash, whose main strength, is the ability to tell a linear story. What makes this story work so well is not the underlying technology. It is the characterizations. It is the creative tension- Will she get the flowers? Will they fall off of the mountain? These are the hallmarks of a great story and they are no different from those of the Ojibwa or Wayson Choy.

Sometimes you are simply handed the story and asked to make something from the literate tradition have just as much appeal in the oral tradition. If you have ever been to a poetry reading you will discover that the poet can make the poem more vivid and compelling than were you to simply sit in solitude and read the poem from the printed page. Moving media from one tradition to the other is extremely difficult if not impossible. It can be done and done well if you approach the story from the oral tradition and look for areas where the strengths of the technology add power to the written word.

There is a 'zine out of the U.S.- Born Magazine- which, each month asks a digital artist to bring a poem to life. One of my favorites is this one, Flesh of a Mangoe



<http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/mango/#>

In this example the technology is used to its fullest. The imaging is dead on. The sound is amazing and the typography is excellent. Yet what makes this piece so compelling is not the technology. What makes it so compelling is the fact the technology is so transparent. You pay attention to the story, not the underlying technology that, by the way, is flash-based.

For a story to work, the audience must focus on the story. Not the storyteller. Let me tell you a story about that one.

