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Section: Mass media, journalism and public communication

Title: Do you want to play? How making-sense of entertainment innovations relates to engaging with media products

Abstract:
What is entertainment? Is it something inherent in the media product, a quality imbued in a book, a movie, a video game by the designer? Is it the interpretation of the media product by the reader, the viewer, the player of how valuable the product is as an entertainment source? Or is it a combination of the two: what features designed to be entertaining are interpreted as such for what people at what time?

The purpose of this study is to explore these questions in the context of virtual worlds, sense-making, and innovation. With the rise of digital media and advancement of the internet as a distribution medium, there are increasingly more media products being offered as sources of entertainment. The digital age of media has given us video games, computer games, massive multiplayer online role-playing games, virtual social games, and so forth. But how entertaining are these innovations in delivery systems seen compared to more traditional media, such as movies? In other words, how do people make sense of the innovations in entertainment as having entertainment value to them, and how does the perception of entertainment value relate to their engaging with that media product?

This study primarily focuses on conceptualizations of virtual worlds and how they are becoming increasingly prevalent in modern media environments. As they become another medium for communication, virtual worlds represent an attempt to technologically innovate upon other entertainment delivery methods. As such, virtual worlds may be consumed, or not consumed, for a variety of reasons. These reasons may or may not be similar to the reasons for engaging with other media products. However, given the technological innovation and the requirements for engagement structured into the design of such worlds, there may be reasons unique to them. The interface technology, the learning curve to engage with the product, and the interaction required to consume the content could be related to how the media product is engaged. What is less known is how the structure of a media product interacts with the desires of the individual to influence his or her engaging with that product. This study hopes to

understand how people make sense of the entertainment values of the innovations of virtual worlds as media products.

This study investigates how media products that vary in their technological innovation are seen as being entertaining by using a quasi-experiment method under the aegis of Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (SMM). To do so, we have asked people with a variety of experiences to participate by engaging with four different media products: a motion picture; a video game; an MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role-playing game); and an MUVE (multi-user virtual environment). Their comparisons and experiences of these sessions form the basis of the study. The data corpus consists of interviews, surveys and recorded sessions. Participants were asked to watch a movie at home and complete a moment-by-moment reception worksheet. Participants were brought into the lab and asked to engage with the virtual worlds. Across these four sessions the content was kept stable by focusing on the superhero genre. The participants were allowed to pick a movie from a library of 15 recent superhero movies. In the lab they engaged with a selection made for them, but they were given the control of deciding how long they wished to engage with the media product. For all four sessions, the participants were instructed to engage for at least 30 minutes. This data corpus is being analyzed for a variety of phenomena and how they interact with each other.

This project and its preliminary qualitative and quantitative results will be discussed in this presentation. The focus of the analysis for this presentation will concentrate on how the participants compared the four media products to each other as being entertaining – which were the most and least entertaining, and what led them to say this. This analysis comes from surveys completed at the end of each session and a follow-up SMM interview conducted after all sessions were completed. What the preliminary analysis shows is the importance of taking into account levels and amounts of experience as well as expectations in how they impact the reception of a virtual world as being a source for entertainment.