

Researching processes of agentizations and emerging circulations of Mingoville.com¹

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To circulate is to make references. This can be done in an overwhelming number of ways. To look at acts of making references lies at the heart of actor-network-theory. Making references means to bring things together and apart, to (dis-)connect, to bridge, to point at/to, to make relationships, to make allies or enemies, to engage, to make passage, to move etc. All are ways to make references. And all are ways to engage in the double move of both adding to and subtracting from reality (Latour, ???), in the sense that while referring, we also both strengthen and weaken the phenomena we are relating. Making them at once something other than and at the same time the same as what they were. As researchers, when pointing at things, we are helping in a very important way to make things (dis-)appear. Any reference must therefore also be understood as a movement. A movement that carries multiple translations of what was there, what is here, and what can be there. A movement, that is a specificity (Law...). A specificity which is as it is *inside*

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² Screenshot from <http://www.mingoville.com/da.html> on April 19, 2010.

these constitutive entanglements (Orlikowski, ???). What takes part in constituting the movement must therefore also be understood as specificity, and both the movement and its constitutive entanglements must be viewed as a specificity. In a sense, this could be called engagement work. That is, all the entanglements that contribute to making engagements work. And working engagements contribute to establishing the identities and agencies of things.

In this paper I will point to a particular thing which is called Mingoville or Mingoville.com. I will point to Mingoville through articulations of Mingoville and its relationships with beginner's English teaching and learning. Instead of stating to begin with what Mingoville is I will point to Mingoville as something that emerges interrelationally through processes of agentizations and emerging circulations of Mingoville. This paper will mainly be concerned with methodological concerns regarding how to research processes of agentizations and emerging circulations of Mingoville on a 'global market place'.

Analytically the paper is centered around examples that illustrate how Mingoville's agencies and engagements in Mingoville may differ radically depending partially on where and how relationships with Mingoville become established. The paper takes point of departure in four stories, that each take part in illustrating how processes of agentizations of Mingoville vary, how multiple ways to point at Mingoville become established in different contexts (e.g. Mingoville A/S, in schools, and in homes).

The concept of passages - passages to and from Mingoville

What is a passage? Not necessarily a channel! Media have historically been referred to as channels for communication and interaction. But there is an important difference between Latour's (???) definition of mediator and the (in that sense) traditional concept of media as channels. In Latour's understanding, being a mediator means being something that is translated and translates. However, how it is translated and what and how it translates are not naturally given in the order of things. Rather than asking how does Mingoville mediate education, learning and teaching, the question would be what mediates relationships between Mingoville and education, learning and teaching? What makes Mingoville *Mingoville* inside these relationships? In other words, what are the passages that become established and take part in articulating Mingoville as some-thing with agency in different situations? When being articulated as a medium (in the channel sense), the agency of Mingoville is already partly predetermined, and also what comes through Mingoville – so to speak: Mingoville may function as a channel for English, and one may ask under which circumstances is Mingoville an appropriate channel for English? One may also want to inquire whether it is possible to say something about the design of Mingoville, and what in the design supports Mingoville in being a good channel for English? These questions are not very exotic. They may, to a lot of people, seem quite natural. However, if Mingoville is not predestined to be a medium in this sense, but instead a mediator in Latour's sense (???), then the questions we ask Mingoville should be different. If Mingoville is not *in itself* either a good or bad channel for English, to embark upon – or not – in different socio-cultural circumstances, then what makes Mingoville something related to English? Inside which relationships do passages between English and Mingoville become established? The passages to be interested in are not given, and neither are the circumstances in relation to which these may become enacted.

Strathern (2009) coins these acts of making passages, associations, connections or references as *moments of bifurcation*. That is (in plain words) the moments when things are made to diverge (split) and/or come together (collate/gather). Moments are not given in the state of things. A moment in Latour's sense (???)

is what lasts as being spatio-temporally connected. A moment in this sense may be a second, a decade, a life time, a thousand years. What matters is, that something is held together spatio-temporally – which is something different from holding together across time and space. Holding together spatio-temporally implies that it *is* enacted as a particular *space-time actor* (Latour, ???). It is not a thing existing to be embedded in space(s) and time (though it may become enacted as such).

Moments of bifurcation may both be found in the little details of ongoing situations, and larger historical events. The current eruption of an Icelandic volcano, dormant for 200 years, is a good example of an enactment of such a moment of bifurcation. However, what should be included in the description of this moment and what it bifurcates is not easily decided. As an event, it is still ongoing. The airspace over Europe is currently closed, and how long the eruption will last, not to mention what will be the short- and long-term effects of this eruption in Iceland and the world, is highly uncertain. The European airspace has been closed for several days and Airplane companies are losing incredible amounts of money and all over the world, people are stuck in their travel plans and cannot come home. The following quote provides a good picture of how difficult this matter is: "This was a rather small and peaceful eruption but we are concerned that it could trigger an eruption at the nearby Katla volcano, a vicious volcano that could cause both local and global damage,' said Pall Einarsson, a geophysicist at the University of Iceland's Institute of Earth Science, Associated Press news agency reported." (Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8578576.stm>)

I would say that this depiction of the event actually provides a quite accurate picture of the difficulties involved in researching emerging circulations and processes of agentizations of Mingoville. Much like the Iceland volcano, it is difficult to say whether the meeting between Mingoville and for example education should be described as a small and peaceful eruption or whether it should be characterized as something that could be causing both local and global damage – which may in the Mingoville case be a good thing. But this is another issue. Eruption in the above quotation is a matter of 'doing evil', and furthermore, the volcano is being described as *the* actor causing this evil. However, while it is difficult to actually claim anything other than the volcano actually being an evil – and being an eruption, that is *a/the* cause of things, the situation could be depicted differently. As days have gone by, the boundaries of the eruption have become less clear in several senses. For example, even to consider this *an* eruption is probably a too simple way of describing the state of things. While we may describe what happens to the volcano as a-being-in-eruption we may also describe acts of being-an-eruption – that is acts of eruption. This is what Strathern (I believe) calls tending to the moments of bifurcation. The moments where things change / become moved, and to keep curious towards the make-up of such moments as well as what it means that something has moved. To look at what happens to the volcano and how it becomes related (is circulated – that is connected) to a multitude of different things in the living world, is to look at the processes of agentizations of the volcano, but also of many other things that partially coexist with the erupted volcano. Both the volcano and the eruption are gradually brought into being through these manifolded and emerging constitutive entanglements (Orlikowski, ???).

Of course, in order to be something – a volcano – that can erupt, is to begin with a particular construction that is founded on a whole lot of constructions of the hanging-togethernesses of nature and the living world. In that sense, this agency – to be an erupting volcano – is the partial result of these relationships. We tend to look at an erupting volcano as a starting point for disaster, but, as Latour (e.g. 1999) illustrates,

already to be an erupting volcano can be seen as the matter at hand, *when* it has been put into particular forms, that is. This matter then, can become something else, when put into other forms, and so on and so forth. Matter takes form, when being framed in forms, the ‘new’ matter – so to speak – then may become part of other forms that matter. These processes of agentizations are what this paper sets out to investigate by pointing to Mingoville, and attempting to research what pointing to and from Mingoville means.

While much of the world was focused on the financial crisis and the climate debate, no one was even considering an Iceland volcano to be able to carry this many eruptions (both natural, financial and social). The opposite is often true with ICTs like Mingoville. They are often imagined to bring about radical and hopefully both local and global eruptions – that is wished-for educational/pedagogical changes. However, as has already been widely discussed by a number of researchers, ICTs are not *in themselves* change agents. Both what it means to be changed, what changes and what a change is can be many things, and also what an agent is, as well as what this means. What partially contains matters and what matters partially contain is shifting, and these shifts in agency as well as what partially contains agencies are what will be the attention of this paper.

Taking the Iceland volcano eruption as an analogy to my pursuits in this paper, I will summon the analyses around the concept of *eruption*. Eruption can be related to breaking out, becoming visible and a sudden release. This of course is a very particular description of the ongoing of things. In this paper eruptions should be considered more along the lines of becoming something other - that is variation. However, variations may be both small and hardly recognizable and huge and impossible to ignore. Either way, variations can be (in-)appropriate. The engagements in Mingoville to be referred to here, all draw in one way or another on the analogy of being some sort of variation/eruption: “If a new situation or movement erupts, it suddenly happens in a surprising and unexpected way.” (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary...). However, different from much e-learning / serious games literature, the eruptions ‘of’ Mingoville are looked upon as surprising results (for better and worse) of various ephemeral assemblages of relationships between Mingoville and teaching and learning situations, rather than being matters of simple safe-paths from Mingoville to educational gains.

Enactments of eruptions

The engagements with Mingoville presented here are all anticipated to provide spaces for variation in the sense that they are forecasted as breaking with or providing a passage to and from something else.

Engagements with Mingoville are enacted for example as:

- a possibility to create spaces for pupils’ individual needs and working paces
- a possibility to create spaces for learning English in places where this may otherwise be difficult
- a possibility to create spaces for learning English when anyways spending a lot of time on the internet
- a possibility to create more fun and entertaining spaces for learning English
- a possibility to create spaces for...

As variations in the sense that Mingoville may be viewed as a different way to engage in the same (English) these examples may not appear that remarkable. However, if we tend to each of these examples and look at for example the ways in which Mingoville becomes an actor in creating “spaces for pupils’ individual

needs and working paces”, and if we tend to the ways in which Mingoville becomes part in enactments of what it means to work with English (write, listen, read, speak), then it turns out that many surprising enactments – that is ways of working this out - exist. These are surprising in the sense that while the initiation of engagements may have been intended and planned for, the results were not necessarily (wished for).

In the four cases, the analyses will take point of departure in constructions of engagements with Mingoville as a possibility to create spaces for pupils’ individual needs and working paces. Each case represents examples of processes of agentizations involved in constructing Mingoville as well as engagements with Mingoville as something that erupts. Drawing on de Laet and Mol (???) the analyses illustrate variations of descriptive and practical framings of Mingoville as well as eruptions; and importantly, variations of practical comparisons of alternatives and reparabilities that take part in making Mingoville work (or not) in different situations.

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