

DISTRACTION

PART TWO: THE SOCIAL POTENTIAL OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

CHAPTER EIGHT: Deep Media

This chapter proposes that digital media could be more enjoyable and easier to use. In order to create communications which touch us more deeply, I propose a series of “rules” called “deep media”. My aim is to challenge both creators and consumers to think harder about the content new technologies deliver to us with such facility.

We look at why the rules are required, and why the time is right now. The suggestion is that deep media can be achieved through greater storytelling, more humanity, better context, the use of body language, sticking to established and useful conventions and simplicity.

Insanely great?

Much of the new media is ugly. A fair amount is wearisomely hard to use. A great deal of the content is superficial, marooned in a sea of its own limited understanding, with no meaningful relationship to anything else. How many “insanely great”¹ web sites can you think of? Places where content, function, interaction and aesthetics combine to create a truly memorable experience? Now try the same exercise with say films, or books, or TV programmes. With a little thought, the average person may well be able to name twenty to thirty films that he or she is passionate about. For each of these other media it is much much easier to think of (many more) wholly engaging creations than it is with the web.

In fact I suspect that if you were to carry out the exercise across the UK in 2004, the same web sites would consistently float to the top – the BBC, Amazon, E-bay. Great web sites, largely characterised by superb functionality, content and interaction design – but hardly

¹ The title of a book by Stephen Levy which eulogised the Apple Macintosh

memorable for their aesthetics. Other digital media – PC software, mobile phones, interactive TV are worse. With the honourable exception of Apple, most software is unappealing to look at or engage with. The first iteration of WAP or mobile internet browsing has been widely perceived as a failure for a wide range of reasons, among which was that it simply looked awful. The next generation of WAP browsing is still aesthetically challenged. No-one I know has ever raved about something they did or saw on Interactive TV.

This is not good enough. Despite the billions spent on digital media since 1993, the user experience is often poor, rarely amazing. It is time to begin to push the boundaries of our expectations and reach for the gorgeous. How to do it? Numerous conversations I had with colleagues at Razorfish between 1999 and 2001 (when it was already clear this was an issue) produced a set of ideas called “**deep media**”. OK – jargon alarms will now be going off in reader’s heads but I hope to prove that this is a useful wrapper for a bundle of thoughts, some common sense, some provocative. I should also say that the term is intended mainly for use with the new digital media, not older technologies, like film, analog TV or newspapers.

What does deep media mean? In truth it’s a mindset, a way of thinking, perhaps best summarised as “try to put humanity back into technology where it’s missing”. Some principles follow – though we should be naturally suspicious of anything that looks like design rules. Deep media is a refusal to accept the status quo. The principles - such as they are – have three audiences. The first is the designers who can apply them each and every time they invent, improve or develop a product or service. The second is those content and media owners (this includes individuals pursuing personal publishing) who in effect “own” or at least are responsible for the digital artefacts the rest of us consume. And the third is of course everyone who consumes digital media. By demanding depth the latter group can be very influential.

The following are the key guidelines that are intended to deliver deep media:

- Introduce storytelling wherever possible
- Create beauty, apply humour, be playful
- Reveal context
- Design “body language” into the experience
- Respect design conventions that make it easy for people
- Simplify all the time

We’ll look at each one in depth ;-) in a moment. I’m sure there are other approaches – these ones happen to have been tested on many people through our everyday work in the last five years at Razorfish and Fjord, and have been met globally with recognition as genuine needs. None of these elements are new, most are applied with patchy frequency and effect already. But there remains so much room for improvement that a call to arms is required.

There is a problem with the list which should be signalled now – and designers reading this will have immediately noticed it. The last two principles are in direct tension with the other four. How can one say, in effect, ‘make it easy for users’, and in the same breath insist on more confusing detail through narrative, fancy design and what appears to be a generalised demand for lots of extra stuff? Doesn’t this introduce complexity, one of the things that this book believes is distracting us?

Done poorly, it will. Design which hides function beneath creative decoration is useless. Yet a tension between usability, functions and aesthetics can be a source of creative inspiration from which great products come. There are also grounds for optimism that deep media can be both easier to use, and more fulfilling (in many ways those statements go together anyway as good designers know). Firstly the time is nearly right to do this; broadband uptake is rising, giving more people access to faster data via their PC’s and mobiles. Richer interfaces may be within our reach without having to wait an age to see them. Secondly examples of deep media are out there. Thirdly we have learnt a great deal from the last 10 years of digital media. Some of the lessons are beginning to be evident in design – web sites are becoming better. Fourthly, if we challenge design to give us what

we want, we may get it. But only if those who pay for design give them permission to create magic². So the fifth reason for optimism is that in the relentless search for competitive advantage, product and service owners may just be beginning to realise that brilliant experiences give them the edge in a crowded environment. The evidence for this lies in our experience over the last year with clients and the mood of the market for design in general.

Deep media is **not** the same as rich media. Rich media is a term usually used to signify a general increase in the use of animation, sound and especially video. It is applied to content on both web sites and mobile phones. Rich media is certainly increasing: the mobile operator Three is partly betting its future on rich media on phones becoming very popular. But adding audio and motion does not necessarily give added beauty, context or sense of story and identity. More is required. The ancient medium of books prove that depth is different from richness: a good novel, printed in black and white, is not rich media (though it surely is in our head), but does have depth and resonance. In fact an over-reliance on rich media may be an issue for traditional content owners who tend to believe that what works in one medium will work in another. You can't just put TV on the web, a book on the TV, a film on a mobile. Big media organisations have discovered that this is the case with the web, but seem to be about to go through the same painful process on mobile phones (where, for example, amplified sound through a speaker is so bad as to be barely an option. So until it gets better, or everyone uses earpieces, audio cannot be relied upon).

Why bother?

Why is deep media needed? From a commercial point of view, we've seen the answer already. It can confer benefits to any organisation that wants to provide its customers with a better experience. These days the sources of sustainable competitive advantage

² If this sounds far fetched, the founder of Apple's Human Interface Group, Bruce Tognazzini, wrote a fascinating paper in 1993 on the connection between magic and software interface design which can be found at www.asktog.com/papers/magic.html

eventually boil down to three: the quality of relationship you have with customers, the culture of the company and a constant programme of innovation. Deep media can improve the first of these, only happens if the second is strong, and is an innovation in itself.

From the point of view of the user of digital technology, a deep media makes more sense of what is experienced, ensures it is more memorable, and provides a higher reward for the commitment of time that media consumption implies. It enhances enjoyment and facilitates choice: in a world full of demands on your attention, this approach helps you decide what to focus on by giving clearer resolution of the whole picture.

Well designed video games give us a peak at deep media in action. There is usually a strong sense of narrative (in fact this element is becoming increasingly important as exemplified by games such as *The Getaway* which uses the streets of London as the background to a crime story where you are a participant). As graphics cards and processing power improve, so games designers have sought to create lush and immersive worlds for us, though this was already happening more than ten years ago. Anyone who played the classic *Myst* will understand that beauty was very much part of the game. Interaction with characters provide opportunities for body language: in an early *Sonic the Hedgehog* the eponymous hero would tap his foot impatiently if you took too much time over a move. Context is provided on many games by shifting camera angle or the ability to view maps, or other parts of the game world. One approach to deep media would be to challenge service providers to make their customer experience more like a game (though not if it irritatingly gets in the way of what users want to do!)

If video games can do it, why to date have other digital media been so poor? The simple answer is that it is too early in the lifecycle of the technologies we are addressing for it to have been any other way until now. Roughly speaking, 1993 – 1996 saw a great deal of experimentation on the Internet. Between 1996 and 1998 the new business models (e.g.: on-line bookstores, portals, search engines, auction sites) began to emerge. From 1998 onwards there was an orgy of investment and some money making until the retreat in

2000 catalysed by the collapse of tech shares on Nasdaq. The retreat lasted until last year. Meanwhile the 90's witnessed the mass adoption of mobile phones, initially with voice as the "killer app". Just as the web went into reverse, the growing success that has been SMS became clear. But then telecoms dropped out of flavour with the stock market too. Now the market for communications technology is heating up again.

Against this background we should not expect design and content formats to have reached maturity. Perhaps they never will: the history of media is mixed in that respect. The basic format of films has been stable since sound was introduced (about two hours long, projected onto a big screen), with experimentation taking place constantly on the fringe (shorts, animation, epics). On the other hand television has never ceased evolving since it was introduced (think about MTV, breakfast shows, reality TV, rolling news such as CNN). Either way, whether digital media eventually has a mature plane to reach or not, it certainly has a lot further to go. How can we be confident of this? There are three reasons: its relative immaturity, the continuing development of technology and lastly the changing ecology of media.

Expect more change

Digital communication is really only 10 years old (less if you consider mass market adoption as the tipping point)³. Consider TV from the 1960's (a decade after its mass adoption). Apart from the fact that much of it is black and white, it now looks almost unbearably antiquated (even the colour bits). If it didn't, much of it would be re-used by TV channels. Imagining the perspective of someone twenty years from now, it is hard to believe that the era of experimentation with digital content is over.

Secondly the technology is still advancing. For instance personal video recorders (PVRs, which use digital technology) such as TiVO or Sky Plus are changing viewing habits. By 2006 25m American homes will have these, and already 300,000 UK homes have Sky Plus. Among other benefits, viewers with PVRs can very easily skip advertisements. According to TiVO viewers do this about 60% of the time⁴. Consider what this might do to TV. Advertisers will try to find other ways to reach viewers (for instance sponsorship and product placement), and some of them may abandon the medium altogether. In addition PVRs go hand in hand with electronic programme guides (EPGs). These allow you to select content that you want to watch *when* you want to watch it. They also permit content selection in a variety of novel ways – for instance by finding programmes *like* one you have watched. View a David Attenborough wildlife special, and the EPG may offer you other natural history content. What does this do to traditional channels like the BBC, Channel 4 or RTE? Possibly they get taken out of the equation altogether. Why rely on a channel to aggregate quality content and deliver it to you, when you can do it yourself (or programme the technology to do it). You might end up buying from a programme production company (imagine an Attenborough Wild Things Co) direct. We'll look at the distraction effects of this personalisation of content in more detail later. For the moment, it's enough to point out that there are serious challenges afoot to the

³ I know some will argue that the Internet is older, and they'd be right: I'm only concerned with public as opposed to special interest use of the technology)

⁴ figures quoted in the Economist

economics of the TV business model. Advertising may decline, or at least change radically and channels change shape and role as they struggle to add value. Other players may enter (Microsoft? Nokia?). It is hard to believe that this will not affect the format of (increasingly digital) TV content. And of course viewing habits will change as people discover that they can fast forward, save, skip, rate and retrieve programmes and elements within them. Content creators will inevitably respond to this. PVRs are just one example of technology change continuing to affect media content. Others include wireless networking (especially at home), the rising adoption of broadband internet access and significant changes to the capabilities of mobile devices.

The introduction of mobile into the ecology of the media world further complicates the picture. So the third reason why we can confidently expect further experimentation and disruption in media and content formats is that no medium works alone. We live in what is called a “cross platform” environment. In other words the Internet, TV, radio, film, DVD, music, mobile, even newspapers, are all interdependent. Change in one medium or platform will affect all the others sooner or later. All compete for our attention, yet feed off each other too. The BBC, previously best known as a broadcast organisation, now also runs the most popular news web site in Europe (www.bbc.co.uk/news). Reality TV depends on interaction via the phone for both the format to work and new revenue streams (money is made from the calls and texts). Mobile ringtones are sold from websites. The most significant commercial event in the world of digital communication has been Apple’s development of a multi-platform vertical business model based on music. Through Apple a music lover can now:

- listen to music via software on their PC or Mac that can also record off a CD inserted in the computer (iTunes)
- buy music for download via Apple Musicstore (viewed only through iTunes)
- consume it on the go with an iPod
- manage their music (rate it with one to five stars, create playlists of multiple tracks)

Apple give you the software, hardware and the shop too. Each bit exists where it can work hardest for the customer. Cleverly Apple has avoided the web with its more restricted browser interfaces, and developed software (iTunes) fit for the job (and no other). Actually, Apple also furnish great examples of the thrust towards deep media which we'll see in a moment.

So despite the massive changes of the last ten years we can see that there is room for further disruptive change in digital media. The rush to commercialise in the late 90's, followed swiftly by the "dot com" collapse, killed off design experimentation as pretty much everyone sought first to get rich quick and then to get out quick. The recession of the early 2000's is now waning. The time feels right to push for greater depth to be designed into the new media which surround us. In what ways can this be done?

Introduce storytelling wherever possible

Stories illuminate our understanding by permitting the light of narrative to play on the world and the roles we perform in it. It has often been said that through stories mankind makes sense of what is around him, which is why storytelling has existed in all cultures in all recorded time.

Stories help us absorb ideas because we have learned to understand the structures that are used to construct them and can relate to a cast of characters. When a narrator sets the scene we know intuitively what he or she is doing. Likewise we expect an ending of some kind to a narration. In between we are sure characters will appear and interact. American literary critic Harold Bloom goes further. He thinks (controversially) that one writer in particular told stories so well that he effectively invented the way we see ourselves. The author in question is Shakespeare and in "Shakespeare – the Invention of the Human" Bloom credits him with actually creating the way in which we see our personalities now, through his galaxy of characters parading across the stage, in and out of tragedy and comedy. Whether Bloom is right or wrong is not the point here: he is a

very influential and admired literary critic who sincerely believes that life has imitated art in the most profound way it could. It is testimony to the power of stories.

Men and women throughout history have known the power of stories and symbolism and used it to their advantage: Canute, Danish king of England famously took his court to the shoreline and in front of them ordered the tide to retreat. The sea refused to obey. Canute succeeded in his objective, which was to convey to his nobles that there were natural limits to what kings could achieve. It's such a good story we still learn it in school. Jesus used stories or parables to convey to his disciples his teachings. Aesop wrote fables in Ancient Greece to capture ideas. Every time an executive says "let's go for the low hanging fruit" they refer (probably unthinkingly) to the fable of the Fox and the Grapes. Which also persists as a popular pub name in England.

To date, the effect of digital has been to undermine or avoid the power of narrative. There are powerful reasons why. The first is that hypertext - the ability to create links to other documents or places has the effect of taking us away from where we are. It's hard to keep on the road of narrative, either as author or reader, when you know it is possible to follow alternative paths, and convenient junctions are offered. This was celebrated by the adoption of the metaphor "surfing" in the early days of the world wide web to describe the experience of moving with little effort from one place to another, following links to unexpected places as it were on a wave of surface level interest. "Browsing" conveys a similar and bovine approach to consumption.

This can be very empowering. A lot of the thinking in this book has been developed by following unanticipated directions of thought on the web. Try looking for information on pretty much any subject you care to choose and the web can shine numerous sidelights for you, intricately meshed together. The flip side is that very few people expect to read a web site in its entirety. Conscious that there are multiple escape routes close at hand, perhaps our brains are too hungry for new information and experiences to focus on what is in front of us, once we think we know what it is.

The second reason why narrative is at a discount in digital media is that, so far at least, those media have not been very immersive. Screen size is a factor. Cinemas retain audiences partly because the size of the screen, the dark, the volume of sound and the comfy chairs all combine to overwhelm us. People say “go and see it while it’s still in the cinema – it’s a big screen sort of film”.⁵ But it cannot just be screen size: years ago I saw *South Park: The Movie* on an airline seatback and howled with laughter - to the discomfort of a colleague next to me watching something else. The fact I did not notice his reaction demonstrates that I was certainly immersed in the film despite the size of the screen. Is it the hardware? But DVDs can play just as well on a PC as a DVD player. It may be the software: HTML simply does not allow for the creation of very immersive experiences, though Flash and other tools do permit greater use of movement and sound.

The immersion problem is probably a combination of issues among which are:

- habit (we are accustomed to thinking of the PC as a research or work tool where we do tasks rather than enjoy ourselves)
- context (as a result of the above we use PC’s in places where we do not expect narrative to be part of the environment, like at work)
- screen size and software limitations
- a history of restricted bandwidth limiting our expectations

So how could stories become part of the mix? Perhaps the project is impossible now that digital has given us the perfect tool for narrative deconstruction. I don’t think so.

There are four ways I can think of.

The first - and I know this may sound a bit lame – is simply to make a renewed effort to use new technology to tell stories as its delivery capability improves in the near future. When TV advertising discovered story telling, 30 second sales messages became a lot more powerful – remember the Levis launderette? Mobile media may provide a natural place to do this as it is a very live and personal medium – imagine narrative that comes to

⁵ The Lord of the Rings trilogy is a good example

you across the day or week. Viewers of a TV soap opera might subscribe to the diary of their favourite character, arriving daily on their phone as an MMS.

This leads on to the second source of narrative energy: time. The web is not a very compelling medium: things rarely happen “live” (with the exception of webcasts). Mobile devices change all that, encouraging the consumption of more time based events – which is why SMS alerts of things like football scores or news have proved so popular.

Time is important to people, and the third place where story telling is already reviving and taking on new shapes is from users themselves. There are signs that this is already happening – blogging is the prime example – most blogs are time based in their basic navigation. The Nokia product, Lifeblog, puts time at the heart of the experience.

Lastly - and there is a huge paradox here – story telling can be enabled by a greater use of context (more on this in a moment). The paradox is of course that adding in lots of context might have the effect of distracting us from central themes and direction. Nonetheless stories gain power from context or else most books could tell their tale in a few pages. War and Peace is long, and we bother to finish it, precisely because we enjoy the contextual fat around the narrative bones. It is time to flesh out digital content too.

Create beauty, apply humour, be playful

There is a hard edge to new communications technologies that needs softening. Thought of so often as an information carrier this is not surprising. Information is a currency we worship, and the high priests appear to have little time for aesthetics. It does not have to be so.

If the new communications technologies were only a tool for doing functional things (connecting, buying, calculating, downloading), then perhaps there would little room for playfulness (though even that is questionable). But we are increasingly using these

technologies for all sorts of creative expression, often personal, as we shall see. If we reverse the question, why should these new media not be a joy to look at and fun to experience? Such strongly worded notions normally NEVER appear in a design brief. Thus we find ourselves in a place where our expectations are modelled more around the design values of information media such as Yellow Pages. We should be aiming at least for a level of Vogue magazine, the Audi TT, the Bilbao Guggenheim, or Baz Luhrman's Romeo and Juliet. These should be the markers for digital inspiration. To repeat for the benefit of purists: this should never be at the expense of usability.

How? Largely it is ambition. Danny Brown won the prestigious Design Museum award for designer of the year in 2004 for his work on the web⁶. The work is experimental in a number of ways and definitely ambitious. More interesting work (by John Maeda) can be seen at www.maedastudio.com. It may take a while for such ideas to cross over to the mainstream that most people experience. Again I think this is down to evolution: new media just has not got there yet. Mail order clothing company Howies create a paper brochure. Each year this outstanding booklet is a pleasure to read and look at – packed with great pictures, insights and witty comments – oh and nice clothes too. Catalogues have been around for a long time so there is plenty of experience for designers to draw on. The attitude behind Howies (“the third biggest clothing company in Cardigan Bay”) also drives creativity on paper at a level that is rare on web sites. It'll come.

The inspiration will also come from personal content. Some of the most interesting photography you can see is now on blogs. Outstanding examples can be found easily at www.photoblogs.org⁷. Most people I know add beauty to their laptops by changing the “desktop” background to a photograph of their own (mine currently shows a two and a half metre wide paella cooking in a Spanish village square – my idea of beauty). Digital humour certainly exists – it is created and distributed by individuals, often in the form of viral messages. Sometimes these can be annoyingly unfunny – but no more so than a mate in the pub telling a poor joke. Large corporations have frequently tried to ban this

⁶ <http://www.play-create.com>

⁷ For direct examples try www.hchamp.com and www.ephemera.org

kind of activity on their networks and equipment – I think we need more humour not less.⁸

It would be especially encouraging to see software get playful. Again – Apple experiment in a small way with this with icons that explode in a cloud when deleted. More please. A few years ago Salon Magazine decided to explore what it would be like if the on-screen messages our computers give us when things go wrong were replaced by Haiku – the three line Japanese poem which always express a profound and simple thought. Instead of “Error type 28: Invalid Action” or something similar, contributors suggested messages such as

“First snow, then silence.

This thousand dollar screen dies

So beautifully”.

And

“A crash reduces

your expensive computer

to a simple stone”.

We can be so po-faced about technology and end up having a miserable time with our screens, or we can mess about a bit. I know which I prefer.⁹

Reveal context

We have explored in an earlier chapter how context often goes awol on planet digital. I’ve also just suggested that it can add to narrative. Like stories and beauty, we need to make a conscious effort to design context back into the media. Information is abundant, but much more valuable, and meaningful, in context. We’ve seen the tendency to present information, with little concern for provenance.

⁸ Of course there is plenty out there if you know where to look. Find it at www.snackspot.com, www.angryalien.com

⁹ But then I’m not the IT director of a large corporation

Is this Beethoven?

**01100000010101010101111101010101010101
01
01010101011011111110000001010101010101
0101000011110000110101010110100**

Or this?



How to add context? The most powerful conceptual weapon is a question - how can we make the invisible visible? This can happen in all sorts of ways. A good example is above: why not provide visuals to go along with the music files that people now keep on their computers. Encouragingly, Apple has thought of this, and iTunes has a space for “song artwork”. At <http://www.sprote.com/clutter> you can download some very cool free software which allows Apple users to pile up CD covers on their desktop for instant

access – double clicking on the cover starts the music from within iTunes. You can also use this to find favourites visually – a method I referred to earlier in the chapter on context. Expect more of this, because people want context to their music and record companies desperately need to add value to compete with free file sharing. Not just pictures but other, currently invisible, stuff. This might include peer ratings of songs and recommendations derived from these. If Radiohead fans typically also listen to The Pixies then that could be useful information to anyone who falls into either category. If you don't mind Apple knowing what you listen to in return for such a service, then it becomes both possible and valuable.

An interesting attempt to give exactly this kind of data some tangibility is Audioscrobbler¹⁰. It describes itself thus: "Audioscrobbler is a computer system that builds up a detailed profile of your musical taste. After installing an Audioscrobbler Plugin, your computer sends the name of every song you play to the Audioscrobbler Server. With this information, the Audioscrobbler server builds you a 'Musical Profile'. Statistics from your Musical Profile are shown on your Audioscrobbler User Page, available for everyone to view. There are lots of people using Audioscrobbler, but usually only the people who like the same sort of music to you are interesting. The Audioscrobbler Server calculates which people are most similar to you, based on shared musical taste, so you can take a look at what your peers are listening to. With this information, Audioscrobbler is able to automatically generate suggestions for new songs/artists you might like. These suggestions are based on the same principals as Amazon's "People who bought this also bought X,Y,Z", but because the Audioscrobbler data is what people are actually listening to, the suggestions tend to make more sense than Amazon."

Using a system called Musiccompass¹¹, this data is then visualised as interactive maps of musical taste. A similar service can be found at Musicplasma¹² As services these

¹⁰ <http://www.audioscrobbler.com/about.php>

¹¹ <http://www.musiccompass.net>

¹² <http://www.musicplasma.com>

probably won't change the world, but two very interesting trends emerge. One is that Audioscrobler uses the power of social networks to build helpful context. The use made of technology by social networks, as I will argue later, is a reason to feel very optimistic. The other pointer is that both services have discovered a way to make previously hidden data useful and attractive. This data may even create links between people which did not exist before, thus helping to build new kinds of social network.

Devices that know their context is another area where we can expect to see many developments. Mobile phones provide extraordinary data, most of which remains invisible. What could be done with it? In the future you will be able to look at a map of where you went, every day of your life, of what media you consumed and when. Graphic representations of who you call and text could help give you a contextual picture of your relationships, allowing you to review and reconsider what you do, who you interact with.

In fact *seeing* context may become a key part of exploring your relationship with other people and their content. In this way deep media can be a way of developing trust. Brown and Duguid¹³ have commented on the difficulties experienced developing digital trust. Their focus is on material documents which “not only serve to make information but also to warrant it – to give it validity.....for information has trouble testifying on its own behalf. Its only recourse in the face of doubt is to add more information. Yet people do not add much to their credibility by insisting “I’m telling the truth”. Nor does it help much to write “good” on the face of a check. Piling up information from the same source doesn’t always increase reliability.....In general, people look beyond information to triangulate reliability. People look past what others say, for example, to gauge trustworthiness. Some clues might be formal and institutional: who does a prospective client work for? What is her credit rating? Others are informal, such as dress, address and cars....In a similar way people look beyond the information in documents.”

¹³ The Social Life of Information

To where? To the weight of the document¹⁴, its print quality, any marks and traces of age. All these are context, and most are usually hard or impossible to see in the digital world. This does not need to be the case: if we recognise the need for context we may be able to design it in. The data is usually there. Could “files” come with covers? Could these give a sense of their size more tangible than a number of kilobytes? Might some documents fade over time to indicate age? How about a system for seeing who else has read or added to a document recently, or where it has been? Where did it originate from? How many times has it been copied?¹⁵ Of course not all of these will be useful all the time. But they add depth to our understanding of, and relationship with, digital content.

Design “body language” into the experience

As most people know, body language conveys a rich range of emotions. We all understand each other better when we can decipher non-verbal communication. A touch of the nose – famously – usually means deception. A raised eyebrow indicates scepticism or surprise. Leaning forward often signals engagement. In fact we have developed a range of sophisticated muscle movements to supplement the words we use. Much of this disappears in electronically mediated communication.

Academic analysis of the events leading to the disastrous decision to launch the Challenger mission in 1986 (the rocket exploded shortly after take-off) has shown quite how much misunderstanding and misinterpretation can happen when body language is not visible. The decision depended on telephone conferences between the Flight Centers in Alabama and Florida and engineers in Utah. Distance and vocal pressure meant that the “engineers missed the signs of Mulloy’s and Hardy’s (the decision makers) uncertainty and willingness to listen”. These signs were, according to those present,

¹⁴ There is something about the physical presence of a big book, or a tapestry for instance, that tells us humans were involved in its production, and that they cared enough to make the effort. Can the same be said for most web sites? Ephemerality suggests less importance.

¹⁵ Much of this data is already standard in say, a Microsoft Word document if you know where to look. But we’ve not yet found ways to make it explicit and useful.....

visually unmistakable. As a result, the engineers withdrew opposition to the launch, which went ahead.¹⁶

The lesson from this is that we should design communications technologies which allow us to *communicate* better. Half of good communication is listening – this is often forgotten. In the Challenger example, accurate listening was hard because the participants only had words and tone to go on, and could not triangulate meaning against other physical clues. Yet in small ways software can demonstrate listening of a kind: increasingly a standard of good design is that icons respond to the user when a cursor is rolled over them to demonstrate that they are active, or a suitable target for dropping another item. In a sense the computer is saying: “yes I know you are there and I’m giving you hints on what you can do”. Another tiny example is the tick on Nokia phones which tells you that a task such as saving a telephone number has been completed. It’s the digital equivalent of a nod.¹⁷

Digital body language can be even more explicit. Many people will be familiar with the problem of e-mail causing unintended offence. The brevity of the medium and the ease with which it is used sometimes cause real problems because recipients fail to distinguish the intended meaning clearly. Sarcasm or heavy handedness is often diagnosed when the writer simply was in a rush. Early users of e-mail understood this: and the result were emoticons such as ☺ ☹ ☺. I have not tracked the early history of these, but guess that they evolved from someone experimenting with keyboard combinations in order to express happiness, gloom, irony (my favourite – the raised eyebrow). It is interesting to

¹⁶ Original research by Diane Vaughan, this example is drawn from the excellent “In Good Company” by Don Cohen and Laurence Prusak which argues for a greater attention to the invisible social capital that makes organisations work well.

¹⁷ A related issue is to note how, when a consumer tries to deal with a company on-line, they so rarely acknowledge the precise problem. You might receive a response saying: “thank you for your contact. Our customer services team are dealing with your issue and will contact you in no more than 36 hours.” However people gifted in communication often repeat back to an interlocutor a summary of their issue)”I think you are saying that...”, so why not use this simple technique in e-mail? This might take the form of “We got your mail. You say your issue is that the book never arrived. OK – we are onto this and will get back to you by tomorrow at the latest. Thanks”.

note that hundreds of years of letter writing in the west had not developed emoticons. They came with digital. Apart from truncated words in text messaging it is hard to think of any other innovations such as this.¹⁸

Yet they are surely there to be had: how for instance could we use colour to express more meaning through electronic communication? What other uses could we make of icons beyond the ubiquitous smileys? Instant messenger software is beginning to explore this. If video phones take off, what could we communicate with the keypad even while we hold the device and talk into the camera? Warmth? Frustration? Agreement? Enthusiasm? Love? If this sounds strange, consider that it may only be because we take a utilitarian view of the technology, and have still to explore its full communications potential. Even if it is quixotic to expect digital to replace or reproduce body language, an achievable ambition would be to augment conversations in new and deep ways.

Respect design conventions that make it easy for people

It is very distracting to have to learn new ways to do achieve a goal. Over time, web designers discovered that navigational links were best placed at the top and left hand side of web pages. This may have been based on natural readability issues, or a gradual consensus – probably it was both. This has become a convention. It is unusual to see the main areas of a web site listed for the user on the right hand side of a page. One expects to see a logo of some kind at the top left hand side of a site. Elsewhere, when clicked, this should lead back to the home page. This doesn't mean that not doing any of these is wrong: simply that if a designer chooses to challenge convention he or she should have good reason to do so.

¹⁸ Matt Webb (www.interconnected.org) is experimenting with what he has dubbed “glancing”, a rapid way of acknowledging other people who you know and are on-line at the same time

Right across digital a lot has been learnt and as a result some basic rules have emerged. User expectations need to be respected. A triangle on its side pointing to the right on audio or video software and hardware means “press/click here to play”. Two thick vertical bars mean “pause”. It makes sense to use these everywhere appropriate as it costs users a lot less time to learn their way around. Perhaps this sounds too obvious (it will to designers). If so, why are new devices and services often hard to get to grips with? Partly it is because conventions have not been used or respected.

Mobile is very prone to this – and the problem is likely to get worse before it gets better. Coming to, or even already on a phone near you, is a range of applications and functions which will seriously complicate life - if you use them. These might include new games, video messaging, video calling, location messaging, music downloading and playback, a wallet containing digital cash, perhaps your keys too. Let’s imagine you have a Nokia (in Europe up to 40% of people do) running what the company calls Series 60, which is the platform for the larger screen colour phones such as the 3650 and 6600. If you have been using it for a while your thumb will have become accustomed to the basic key combinations: that the two top keys (generally) are for choices and action, that generally the menu choices are “options” and “select” for the left key, and “back”, “cancel” or “exit” for the right key. This is pretty consistent right across the applications that Nokia put on the phones such as the camera, profiles, call log, contacts. Once however other parties bring their applications to the phone none of this is guaranteed. There is a fascinating war of sorts taking place between the major handset manufacturers (especially Nokia) and operators over who should control the phone interface. Microsoft are a combatant too as they wish their system to be the winner – from a design perspective one hopes they don’t win. Re-learning the basic rules of interaction for everything you do on your mobile device will only add to distraction.

A deep media approach will be hampered by inconsistent conventions: that is why it is a rule to respect users.

Simplify all the time

My colleague Olof Schybergson brings this rule to life. What, he asks, is a kitchen for? Not to be a kitchen, but for cooking and eating in. Consider poor kitchens, often great for showing off the owner's expensive taste but utterly useless for the business end of things. Now imagine that the core things you need to do in a kitchen (perhaps prepare, heat, serve) were obfuscated or hidden by twenty five other potential activities and their signage (freeze!, grind!, store!, soak! mix! Etc..). Bad design frequently does this in the digital world.

Good tests for simplicity are:

- is it clear what this product does?
- can I do things quickly?

Apple has been brilliant in this respect. The iPod has just five “buttons” and the dial. iTunes is in its fourth iteration, and has had small but significant additions at each software release. From the start it was clear that it played music on your computer. Later a shop was added, and most recently quick links to information on each artist. The effect has been to add complexity, but at an easy to absorb pace. Layered complexity means that advanced options are there for power users if they really want it, but novices are not confronted with it.

Deep media then is an approach to communications technology which seeks to humanise our electronic interaction as far as is possible and desirable. There will always be constraints. However as long as mankind seeks meaning then stories, beauty, context and a sense of body language are worth striving for. So long of course as these don't obfuscate the point. Is there not then a risk that deep media actually increase distraction – taking us further away from the real? Perhaps, but the intent is to replace the superficial with meaning, allowing us better choice over what to engage with and more fulfilment from what we do.