
Everyday creativity: Appropriation before, during, and after dissemination

Dan Perkel

School of Information
University of California, Berkeley
102 South Hall
Berkeley, CA 94720-4600 USA
dperkel@ischool.berkeley.edu

Abstract

In this paper, I present a range of perspectives that shift the analysis of creativity from either a creator- or experience-centric model to a shared, social process that occurs in a continuous chain of appropriative activity. Furthermore, creativity is not exceptional, calling for a shift in orientation to the mundane everyday activity in people's lives. This view of creative practice raises particular challenges for how to explicitly model creativity for use in systems to promote it.

Keywords

Creativity, appropriation, literacy, language, design

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

The question of how new media has changed the relationship between those who are the creators or producers of artifacts and those who are users, audience members, or consumers is one that is at the forefront of discussions in a variety of academic and professional communities. A potentially more useful question, though, is how do new media expose problematic aspects in the models of these

Copyright is held by the author/owner(s).

Presented at:
Supporting creative acts beyond dissemination.
Creativity & Cognition 2007, June 13, 2007.
Washington DC. USA.

relationships that existed previously with “old media.” In order to answer this question, I am integrating theories of literacy, language use, everyday life, and design to show that regardless of media form creativity involves a continual process of appropriation. This sense of appropriation runs through a number of claims I explore below. First, in the production of artwork, the audience always plays some generative role, rather than just an interpretive one. Second, creativity is found in everyday practice. Finally, design can be seen as a communicative activity just as communication can be seen as design activity, which in turn implies that everyday construction of meaning is creative and the even design of objects involves a social co-construction of meaning.

Audiences in the production of creative work

A common perception of new media is that it changes the relationship between creator and audience of artwork, allowing audiences to explicitly help create art. However, this perspective may not be a new property of digital media. Walter Ong [13], in an attempt to address what he saw as fundamental differences between cultures with writing and cultures that rely on oral communication, argued that oral art-forms and performances differed from written literature in a number of ways. Remembering and performing an epic poem, whether in ancient Greece or by Yugoslav Bards, is not a process of rote memorization of a text, but in an improvisational re-telling that includes the poets “own themes and formulas” (p. 60). While, “formulas are variable,” and different poets will have different performances of the “same” work, “their use belong in a clearly identifiable tradition.” Moreover, Ong notes that particular performances will shape what is performed: “Originality consists not in the introduction

of new materials but in fitting the traditional materials effectively into each individual, unique situation and /or audience.” Thus, the audience helps create the performance in two ways: a poet’s performance relies on an audience’s common knowledge of the theme and stories and the audience actually creates a part of the experience for themselves and the poet.

Ruth Finnegan, an anthropologist of communication who for four decades has argued against the notion of a dichotomous difference between orality and literacy, nonetheless agrees with Ong on this point. She [7] notes that “each piece of oral literature is realized *in its actual performance* and...*before a particular audience*” (p. 72, original emphasis). Moreover, she also argues that even the audiences of written texts, especially as they are anticipated and perceived by a text’s author, have a role in those texts’ construction. There is a long tradition of literary theorists who make similar, if not more extreme arguments, and the role of the readers of text in the creation of meaning is among the historical debates in theorizing literacy.¹

One final perspective contributes to this notion of audience co-construction of artwork. In his discussion of “art worlds,” Howard Becker [2] positions an artwork at the center of a web of collective activity. There is someone or some group of people who the network grants the status of “artist,” but both material resources and a wide range of people shape the

¹ Roland Barthes’ classic “Death of the Author” is a foundational text in the literary tradition.

creation of the piece to greater and lesser extents. In Becker's detailed analysis he notes that not only do many people contribute to the work's production, even audiences have a key part in the process. At one level many artists want to make sure that there is an audience to show his or her work to, thus shaping their work to fit some group, but audiences also play a role in shaping the conventions of an artwork upon which the artists rely. An artist then responds to those conventions, either by using them and meeting audience expectations, or by playing with the conventions, trying to create new ones. The artist is successful when the audience begins to learn and respond to the new conventions. These new conventions then become part of the battery of resources for future artwork. Becker's sociological depiction and analysis of an art world reveals that any artistic production, whether one performed or one fixed in a medium of some kind, is a result of a creative process and relationship between artist and audience before, during, and after the production and dissemination of a work.

Everyday creativity

While Becker's particular sociology of artistic production positions creativity in between those traditionally thought of as "artist" and those thought of as "audience," he also demystifies artistic practice, and by extension creativity. His approach "seems to stand in direct contradiction to the dominant tradition...in which creativity comes to the surface and the essential character of the society expresses itself, especially in the great works of genius" (p. xi). Instead, his account treats artistic production as an occupation, like others in many ways.

One way of reading this account would be in a negative light, as a reduction of creativity to something mundane. On the other hand, one could read Becker to be saying that there is tremendous creativity in artist practice, but not only is it distributed amongst multiple people, every other occupation in which people have to address issues of conventions, marshalling of resources, challenges of distribution, and reputation are just as creative, in different yet parallel ways.

Thus, creativity is a part of everyday experience, and the question of significance and extent of the creative process may be a matter of perspective and position. French philosopher Michel de Certeau [6] claims that consumers who are often weak in relation to the power of institutional producers of goods, still creatively navigate this territory and actively produce meaning in every consumptive act. Popular culture is produced in the "everyday creativity" of the marginalized majority. De Certeau makes this case across a number of domains and forms of production, including the seemingly mundane activities of reading, walking, and cooking. In an inversion of Becker's argument, he elevates all of this activity to "art" and "ways of making."

Paul Willis' notion of symbolic creativity [15], grounded in ethnographic analysis of youth in Great Britain, makes a similar argument. "Common culture" involves creative practice across many activities as people make use of symbolic representations. Not only is this creative process a part of everyday life, it is an essential part. It is unavoidable and rooted in people's everyday communication practices, stories, jokes, fashion, daily performances, and other activities. According to Willis, these elements are the raw

materials of “necessary work.” Symbolic creativity is that part of the work that fashions these materials into the “production of *new* meanings...roughly [the] equivalent to what an all-embracing and inclusive notion of the living arts might include (counterposed, of course, to the current exclusions of ‘art’)” (p. 11).

Design as communication, communication as design

Both Willis and de Certeau, in their conceptions of the “everyday,” offer a model of the locus of creative practice that transcends what is often thought of as “work” and what is thought of as “play” or leisure. Work is a part of the everyday, rather than a social space separate from it. In more recent years, similar arguments have emerged, and continue to be debated, in reference to digital media and digital products. Bødker [4], for example, argues that the recent orientation towards leisure and creative engagement with new media, part of the “third wave of HCI,” should still embrace and engage the attempts by those practicing in the “second wave” of HCI to understand these practices at work.

Along those lines, a number of design practitioners and theorists looking at the practice of design and design for others’ work practice, have posited the notion that design is a form of communication. As a recent example, Béguin [3] argues that design consists of an “activity exchange” mediated by artifacts and productions. With this in mind, he exposes the successes and challenges of the design of a chemical factory alarm system that treats the alarm as an object whose meaning is up for constant negotiation in an ongoing conversation between designers and users.

This argument builds on earlier perspectives, such as that of Brown and Duguid [5] who argue that that thinking about design as communication is the critical starting point for a way of conceptualizing products that does not assume that the artifact is self-explanatory or explicit. This is a key conceptual hurdle for starting to address the elusive notion of “context” and “practice” in the creation of digital technologies.

In these views, what is often thought of as a creative process, design, is also shown to be one that is inherently communicative. On the other hand, those [9, 11, 12] noting the increasing use of new media technologies’ affordances for multimodal communication and creativity have argued that all communication, mediated by digital technologies or not, is multimodal. A face-to-face conversation is a combination of oral discourse, gestures, spatial proximity, and other modes [9]. A written text often involves some combination of language and images; multimodal texts combine various digital media [12]. Therefore, making meaning from the communication process involves not just a process of “interpretation,” but a creative process of “design” whereby people uses the available resources, both material and symbolic, and engage in their own design process [11, 12]. In this design process, they work within the constraints of these resources, selecting and combining those that they project as most “apt” for their purposes. What they produce, whether a designed artifact is itself available for re-design by others [11].

There are at least two implications of this convergence in thinking about communication through language and communication through designed artifact as rooted in a similar “dialogical process” [3], whether we are talking

about old media or new media. First, the creative products of communication and design are the embodiment of social processes between people. Second, people do not merely interpret meaning in language and designed objects. They *make* meaning through response to language and through use of artifacts. Interpretation should not be seen as an opposition to construction, but as a part of the creative construction of meaning. Similarly, an artifact in use is the result of multiple creative activities between designers, between users, and between designers and users.

Conclusion: the challenges and implications of appropriation

In this paper, I have briefly introduced perspectives from a number of disciplines, that all can be seen to address the topic of the locus of creativity. Here I have accentuated their similarities, though going deeper into the respective arguments would reveal tensions between them as well. Nevertheless, based on the commonality of these views on the nature of creative activity, I have argued that all communication involves creative practice whether what is produced is a material “thing,” a symbolic “meaning,” or a performance. Additionally, while there is a great deal of value in trying to understand creativity and attempting to design for creative practice at an individual level, these theories also demonstrate that it is crucial to consider creativity as a collective, social practice. Finally, creative practice is rooted, perhaps even a constant, in the mundane, everyday experiences of all of us.

A running theme of the paper is that creativity always involves some form of appropriation, whether by artist, audience, designer, or user. As the literary theorist

Bakhtin [1] argued, when we speak, type, write, or create, we are contributing our voices to the many voices that we have heard and that have come before us:

Our speech², that is all our utterances (*including creative works*), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness, varying degrees of “our-own-ness,”....These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (p. 89, emphasis added).

Creativity occurs when we join our work to the work of others. The result isn’t “our own,” but it now bears our mark.

These arguments raise a compelling challenge for those hoping to model creativity or design for creative practice before, during, or after the dissemination of a product or work. If a model for creativity embraces appropriation as an essential element of what occurs between people in the creative process, what can we do to design systems for creative practice or “embed” this model into a technical system?

I do not propose to address this question here, though this is the challenge that has been the subject of recent research and debate in the HCI community (e.g. [7, 10, 13]). It is also the topic addressed by some of those in

² Note that Bakhtin is talking about “speech” meaning any use of language, not just the spoken word. Brown and Duguid and Béguin build on Bakhtin in their models of designing artifacts.

Bodker's "third wave" of HCI, that Brown and Duguid posed in the "second wave" over a decade ago, and that Béguin argues has been a challenge offered by French human factors designers for the past fifty years. Thus, this is not a new challenge but one that has been given special emphasis recently due to the material properties of digital media. Not only do those playing the role or function of creators appreciate and note the "inventiveness" of audiences and users (to appropriate a phrase from Béguin), and implement features in products that allow for flexible adaptation and use [7], rethinking the creative process along the dimensions outlined in this paper could be an important shift in how we think about designing for creativity using media of any form.

Acknowledgements

Any paper on appropriation must acknowledge a debt to many others that have contributed to this work, whose ideas I have populated with my own. The references below are a starting point, but thanks to various others over who continue to contribute significantly to my thinking about this topic, only some of whom, I can identify by name, including Paul Duguid, Glynda Hull, Megan Finn, Ryan Shaw, and Nancy Van House.

References

- [1] Bakhtin, M. M. "The problem of speech genres." In *Speech genres and other late essays* ed. Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist, and Vern W. McGee. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, 1986, 60-102.
- [2] Becker, H. *Art Worlds*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1982.
- [3] Béguin, P. "Design as a mutual learning process between users and designers." *Interacting with Computers* 14, (2003), 709-730.
- [4] Bødker, S. When Second Wave HCI meets Third Wave Challenges. *Proc. NordiCHI 2006*. ACM Press, (2006).
- [5] Brown, J. S. and Duguid, P. "Borderline Issues: Social and Material Aspects of Design." *Human-Computer Interaction* 9, 1 (1994). 3-36.
- [6] de Certeau, M. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. UC Berkeley Press, Berkeley, CA, 1984.
- [7] Dourish, P. The Appropriation of Interactive Technologies: Some Lessons from Placeless Documents. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* 12(4), 465-490, 2003.
- [8] Finnegan, R. *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*. Blackwell, New York, NY, 1988.
- [9] Finnegan, R. *Communicating: The multiple modes of human interconnections*. Routledge, London, UK Routledge, 2002.
- [10] Galloway, A., Brucker-Cohen, J., Gaye, L., Goodman, E., and Hill, D. Design for Hackability. In *Proc. DIS 2004*, ACM Press (2004), 363-366.
- [11] Kress, G. Design and Transformation: New theories of meaning. In Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M (Eds.) *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. Routledge, London,, 2000, 153-161.
- [12] Kress, G. *Literacy in the New Media Age*. Routledge, London, UK, 2003.
- [13] March, W., Jacobs, M., and Salvador, T. Designing technology for community appropriation. In *Extended Abstracts CHI 2005*, ACM Press (2005).
- [14] Ong, W. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Routledge, New York, NY. Routledge, 1982.
- [15] Willis, P. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1990