Three key concepts in Digital Media

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Tres conceptos clave en medios digitales

ABSTRACT

Over last two decades, interactive communication has taken an increasingly central role in most communication processes. There is a demand for professionals who can design and lead on the implementation of scenarios in which users engage with information à la carte, becoming active communicators that generate content which feeds back into the system. In order to understand digital communication, we need a sound knowledge of its fundamental concepts and ideas. In this text we present a list of three –perhaps 'the' three– key concepts for understanding and working with digital media: Interactivity, participation and immersion.

RESUMEN

En las dos últimas décadas, la comunicación interactiva ha tomado un papel cada vez más importante en la mayoría de procesos comunicativos. Las empresas reclaman profesionales capacitados para liderar, idear y diseñar escenarios en los que los usuarios se informan a la carta, se comunican con el medio o aportan contenidos y experiencias que retroalimentan todo el engranaje. Para entender la comunicación digital, necesitamos un conocimiento sólido de sus ideas y conceptos principales. En este texto, presentamos una lista de tres -quizás 'los' tres- conceptos clave para entender y trabajar con medios digitales: Interactividad, participación e inmersión.

KEYWORDS

Digital media, interactivity, interaction design, participation, immersion.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Medios digitales, interactividad, diseño de interacción, participación, inmersión.

Introduction

Digital media have facilitated a context where new forms of communication and storytelling are possible. Interactive communication professionals become here key specialist who can understand the potential of the medium and, in turn, become creators or, at least, facilitators of stories (Soler-Adillon et al., 2016). They are responsible for the innovation in communicative processes: Designing and implementing them successfully not only in the well established channels and contexts, but also in these which appear –and sometimes disappear- at a much higher rate than that to which the pre-digital professional was used to. Some of these new channels and contexts will complement or expand existing ones, while others will end up replacing them entirely.

At the same time, media itself has radically changed, adapting at different rates –and with varying success—to the context in which concepts such as ubiquity, active user (as opposed to the passive viewer) or user generated content have reshaped the landscape. It is a context where social media has gone from being a space for dialogue on 'main' media (second screen) to become the main context in which stories are accessed and disseminated, often replacing the media platforms themselves, not without new inherent problems.

However, and despite the accelerated rate of change, there are some concepts that remain central in order to understand digital media, the sound understanding of which is key to successfully engage in the creation of interactive communication processes. As stated above, we consider the three concepts discussed in the following section as being central to this discourse.

Interactivity, participation and immersion

Interactivity refers to ability of a system to partake in the process of interaction. When this refers to communication, a key aspect is the fact that the passive viewer or reader of traditional media is replaced by an active user; an entity with agency. The way this agency affects the reception of the work or the work itself is widely varied. And while interactivity is intrinsic to digital media, one can argue that not all of our experiences with it are really interactive, according to the definition below.

In this context, working with interactive media not only means telling stories, but also creating and designing experiences for an active audience. Here point of view of the designer of these systems becomes important, and from it it's useful to differentiate between passive, reactive and interactive systems, and to understand that there is not so much a division but a continuity between the latter two (Soler-Adillon, 2012). However, while reactivity means roughly that the same actions will always result in the same system responses, interactivity

refers to a much complex process.

I have defined interaction as series of related actions between two or more agents where at least one of them is an artificial system that processes its responses according to a behavior specified by design, and that takes into account some of the previous actions executed by them (Soler-Adillon, 2015). This definition aims not at addressing all types of interaction, nor at framing interactive systems under the umbrella of usability, but at a more experimental approach. Useful ideas to understand this are the concepts of design for motivation (Ribas, 2001) or poetic interaction (Penny, 2011).

The second key idea to understand digital media is participation. Although some authors conflate it with interactivity, it is very useful to differentiate both concepts. While interaction always implies some sort of participation, this is a pertinent distinction in order to frame the different types of activities that can take place with technological systems that afford that the users take action in relation to them. It is especially relevant in the context of the web 2.0 and social media, where user generated content is central. The proposal here is to understand participation as contribution: That is, the creating content by the user of the system, as a different act than that of interacting with this content.

Participation, from this point of view, includes any form of contribution of a user to a (generally online) system. Uploading picture to a social network is an act of participation, and it does involve interactivity when the actual uploading is happening. But it is a trivial and mechanistic kind of interactivity. Thus, the interest here in such cases does not reside the interactivity as described above. It is on this very act of contributive participation that, in turn, constitutes a form of social interaction.

The third and final concept in this triad is immersion. Similarly to interaction, it can appear in a digital media experience in various degrees. But in this case we can differentiate between a technological and a psychological component of it or, in other words, between spatial and emotional immersion (Zang, Perkins and Arndt, 2017). The first is the immersion created with systems that are designed to isolate the user from his or her environment, and give control of the point of view on a usually 360 degree scene. These types of technologies, which find its technological ancestors at least on Baker's panoramas of the late eighteenth century, have resurfaced in recent years with the revival of Virtual Reality. They are well known for providing very strong experience in terms of 'sense of place', and have been linked to the –already cliché–creation of empathy, as they are very powerful in having the user experience a specific point of view.

There is, however, another type of immersion that relates strongly to interactivity. In this case it is not so much the technology but the engagement that generates immersion. Playing a game in a very small screen, or a monitor a few meters away

can be as immersive as using a Virtual Reality headset, if we understand immersion as this psychological loss of aware-ness of our immediate surroundings.

Conclusion: New Stories

As the communicative landscape reshapes, and the profes-sionals and creators of interactive communication learn to navigate it, it is useful to have the three key ideas mentioned here as markers in the compass. They form a triad that helps make sense of both how to design the systems through which the audiences will access the content (the stories told), and also the narratives themselves.

The stories of the future (or many of them, at least) will not just be told. They will be actively experienced. And interacti-vity, participation and immersion will continue to be among the core concepts that we will need to soundly understand in order to successfully engage in a creative process that is successful in terms of audience reach and on its own creative goals.

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CV

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From 2005 to 2016 he worked at Universitat Pompeu Fabra as a researcher and instructor in digital arts and interactive communication among other subjects. He has also taught at Universitat de Vic, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Unvier-sidad San Francisco de Quito (Equador). He has participated in interactive installation, performance and video projects, which have been shown in New York and Barcelona, as well as in online projects and several workshops and conferences.