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Reflections from Jodi Forlizzi's seminar and discussion
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So talking with Jodi got me thinking... What is interaction design? More importantly, why do we name things?

One of the most influential courses I took in my undergraduate career was "Language and the Mind" taught by George Lakoff. That course changed me in two ways: First, I lost my sense of humor for over four months. It seemed that whenever a friend would tell a joke, I'd be so preoccupied in analyzing the metaphoric structures that I missed the humor. That gradually went away, but the other effect was just a seed that's been growing inside my mind (ack! The metaphors are everywhere!), nurtured by every class I've taken since that semester. The seed was the idea of contested concepts.

this seed was planted as a discussion of traditionally acknowledged contested concepts, terms that encompass different mental geographies to different people. "Feminism", "religion", and "justice" are all commonly agreed to have different scopes depending on who you talk to. Not just different opinions, but different understandings of what the opinion was about.

Okay, I'm getting a bit long-winded.

This initial concept has started me thinking about *why* we name things. It seems that there are two main reasons; to use names (titles, nouns, verbs, etc.) as references that we can pass from ourselves to other people, and as fences (metaphoric blip) describing (in the most literal sense) what falls inside and outside of that given reference.

This idea came up again and again in Jodi's presentation and our subsequent discussion. While we were all discussing "What is interaction design?" I was struggling with the question of "how will this definition be used, and how can we have a profitable discussion of the definition of how the final definition will be used? In effect, aren't we designing a lexicon in the absence of use cases?

In multimedia, for example, I see a continuum from emotion -> illustration -> visual design -> interaction design -> information architecture -> computational architecture -> code. The titles I put in the above continuum are arbitrary, as their ranges along the spectrum are largely contested concepts.

At the most academic level, it would be nice to have well-established and, more importantly, widely recognized, circles that define the scope of the roles of interaction designer, visual designer, user experience designer, and the like. It would make discussions easier, and would make it easier for these roles to make inroads in the corporate world, as both their purpose and importance can be more easily conveyed to resource planners and the like.

Falling into a more pragmatic state, though, I recognize that the actual work done by someone in our realm is usually accomplished by several people, and each person wears several hats ('responsibility as apparel') ahem, I mean taking on several roles (oops, 'employee as thespian')). So, as we briefly talked about last week, interaction design might better be seen as a role instead of a position, but there's still the problem of overlap. Discrete boundaries on the artistic continuum make sense when they're defining someone's job vs someone else's job, but when they're merely roles that people take on in conjunction with some number of other related or unrelated simultaneous roles, I wonder if the 'discreteness' is still important.

Is it useful to take such a broad range of activities as are performed under the umbrella of 'interaction design' and label them as such, rather than have the more granular recursively decomposed tasks which can be assigned to people.

I don't know a single person who calls themselves an interaction designer who doesn't also have

a 'fingerprint' of other associated or unassociated abilities, and most of these people have found jobs where they can use their more unique capabilities to take on roles within their organizations that aren't under that ID umbrella.

Are we doing ourselves a disservice by pushing the digestible, packagable, brandable and shippable term 'Interaction Designer'? Does it dehumanize us? Does it inhibit us from conveying the individuality we each have, the individuality that gives us the spirit to tackle problems such as this one?

I don't have any real answers, just a lot of questions, but this is an arcing question I intend to keep working at on my own through our subsequent seminars. I don't consider myself disillusioned by any means, but the more I hear people asking "what is interaction design?" I find myself asking "why are we segmenting it, and who are we segmenting it for?"