

The Triad of Amazon.com

It pulls, You push, UPS delivers.

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Awkward-sized picture books and the smell of musty paper. Whispers and concentration. Wooden chairs of uncomfortable sizes. Despite our nostalgia for bookstores as we have known them, another kind of bookstore has pushed its way to the front—one that has challenged our associations with the word “bookstore.” Amazon.com has introduced a store without books we can immediately touch. The books at Amazon.com are one-dimensional, and for the majority of the interaction, they exist only on our computer monitors. Yet Amazon.com has had over three million customers. Somehow, people have been enticed and persuaded by this kind of interaction. To understand the interaction, it is important to look at the signs and symbols used on a page, how the traditional bookstore has shaped the site, and why it works.

[THE PAGE / INTERPRETING SIGNS AND SYMBOLS]

Because I am a member of a specific social group (that of an American and a frequent Internet user), the homepage of Amazon.com comprises both icons and text that are recognizable to me. The designers of Amazon.com have consciously used the conventional metaphor of tabbed sheets as a navigation bar. This tool may facilitate the ease of use for some novice Internet users because, as Dean Barnlund suggests, “For most people, change is threatening. It is the old and familiar that is trusted; the novel and unknown that arouses alarm.”¹ Amazon.com, therefore, presents icons that closely represent the information they will reveal: a *lock* for security; a *blue ribbon* for award winners; an *envelope* for e-mail reviews. Clicking on a shopping cart symbol, for example, brings up a page that charts progress in our shopping visit.

These signs and symbols, however, may not always lead users to the designers’ intended meaning, according to the existential theory of design. Because humans live in their own assumptive worlds,² they may translate symbols differently. According to this theory,

people create their own meanings for signs and symbols, “formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact.”³ Where I lived in Japan, for example, a shopping cart looked very different from the icon on Amazon.com’s site: in that community, people may not connect shopping with this symbol. Designers may have intended the symbol to be intuitive, yet the experiences of certain people, even within one social group, may lead to other meanings. Herbert Blumer explores this difference in meaning:

The meaning of a thing is but the expression of the given psychological elements that are brought into play in connection with the perception of the thing; thus one seeks to explain the meaning of a thing by isolating the particular psychological elements that produce the meaning.⁴

Communication being the only kind of interaction for existentialists, their idea of meaning is very localized—there is no true subject matter. The meaning of each page arises out of an individual’s communication with the screen.

[THE TRADITIONAL BOOKSTORE / FEELING WELCOME]

Besides interpreting meanings of symbols, individuals must also wrestle with the *absence* of another kind of interaction—facial engagements.⁵ Human encounters are inevitable in a conventional bookstore. In that environment, human encounters can be both positive (when we seek help) and negative (when we feel embarrassed about a particular book or unknowledgeable about a genre). “Eye-to-eye looks, then, play a special role in the communication life of the community, ritually establishing an avowed openness to verbal statements and a rightfully heightened mutual relevance of acts.”⁶ Because there is value in this kind of mutual activity, it would seem that a website could be no competition.

Yet, this isn’t true. The designers of Amazon.com have incorporated some of the human features of visiting a conventional bookstore into the site. First, everyone is welcomed on the homepage, whether they are first-time visitors or repeat customers. In addition, the site intelligently keeps a record of past purchases, provides book reviews, and recommends books that seem to be within a person’s area of interest.

The site also gives individual attention to first-time customers on topics such as how to navigate the site, search for a book, and place an order. This individual attention is important because “society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it

may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication.”⁷ Here, the designers have anticipated that some people may be more adept at moving through the site than others. In response, they reserve an entire page to the transmission of this knowledge. By “making the individual a sharer or a partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure,”⁸ the site has achieved some degree of human interaction.

[THE TRADITIONAL BOOKSTORE / HAVING A SUCCESSFUL INTERACTION]

Amazon.com provides all of the books and none of the humans. While browsing Amazon.com, people can feel uninhibited to explore new topics and books. While all the books are available for their evaluation, there are no other humans to judge their selections. “Communication is facilitated when there is a capacity to create a non-evaluative atmosphere. Defenses are provoked...by the expectation of criticism.”⁹ And although Amazon.com is not simply communication, it overcomes the major barrier to “mutual interpersonal communication” by providing people with an impartial and unbiased environment.¹⁰ People may, therefore, feel more inclined to learn about new topics, explore unfamiliar territory.

It seems then, that humans may be more apt to learn in such an environment: an environment that allows individuals room “for uniqueness, for self-direction, and for self-initiated learning,” reasons that they may read in the first place.¹¹

[WHY IT WORKS / ITS AMAZONNESS]

Essentialist interpreters would argue that the environment of Amazon.com has a specific *amazonness*. John Dewey suggests that “...the meaning which a conventional symbol has is not itself conventional. For the meaning is established by agreements of different persons in existential activities having reference to existential consequences.”¹² In other words, people may interpret a symbol differently across social groups, but within a group, the meaning will continue to be the same, arising from a variety of different people’s experiences.

Essentialists believe there is a constant rhythm of doing and undergoing, out of which arises form—a final resolution of the site's intrinsic amazonness. The site has both a specific subject matter and a certain essence. By providing multiple access points to the site's pages, the designers have manipulated the users' desires by using what *they* consider to be the readers' desires.¹³

The intent of the designers to accommodate all groups of people, unfortunately, has resulted in a hypertrophy of information and an atrophy of form¹⁴ because much of the information is repetitive, it may also be confusing to its users, and people may waste time trying to orient themselves to the page and discern the desired information.

The hypertrophy of information is a way for the designers to account for the different social groups that may visit the site. There are *seven* different ways to access the same information on the home page alone, i.e., search for a book by name. Thus, the constant push and pull of an individual and the site can only lead to the same information. This interpretation directly counters the existentialist theory in that there is a distinct relationship among all these steps that, combined, *is* the interaction. For existentialists, there would only be one part—a doing, an undergoing, a feeling, or an interpretation.

For essentialists, the environment of Amazon.com is just the *medium* to get desired results—receiving books in the mail, for example. Yet when existential interpreters receive these same books, they would not translate this act to be part of a larger experience, of what motivated them to order, which links they followed. Instead, each step would have been separately important. But essentialists see no particular parts; it is the doing and undergoing, the *forming* that is important. The meaning of the site is not determined by what an individual interprets the signs and symbols to mean, it is a combination of interpreting signs and symbols, feeling welcome, and having a successful interaction. The relationship of these parts, this interaction, creates meaning. And because the site has a certain amazonness, UPS will continue to deliver people's books, if that is what they desired upon first visiting Amazon.com.

References

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- ³ Herbert Blumer, "The Nature of Symbolic Interactionism," in *Basic Readings in Communication Theory*, ed. C. David, Comp. Mortensen. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 105.
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- ⁶ Ibid, 142.
- ⁷ John Dewey, "A Brief Course in Philosophy of Education: Education as a Necessity of Life," in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, (1924; reprint, Simon & Schuster: 1997), 5.
- ⁸ John Dewey, "Education as a Social Function," in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, (1924; reprint, Simon & Schuster: 1997), 14.
- ⁹ Dean C. Barnlund, "Communication: The Context of Change," in *Basic Readings in Communication Theory*, ed. C. David, Comp. Mortensen. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 23.
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- ¹¹ Ibid., 292; idem, "Significant Learning: In Therapy and Education."
- ¹² John Dewey, "The Existential Matrix of Inquiry: Cultural," ed. Jo A. Boydston (Southern Illinois Univ Pr (Trd), 1991) 47.
- ¹³ Kenneth Burke, "The Nature of Form," in *Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings* by Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 197.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 196.