Stephenson's Play Theory and Online News Reading

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ABSTRACT: As children know (but adults sometimes forget), using a computer is "fun." Media that use a computer to deliver news and other timely information provide an opportunity to explore William Stephenson's play theory of mass communication in a new light. These online or interactive media encourage exploration. They respond instantly to individual input. They require us to make self-enhancing personal choices; otherwise, they just sit there. Yet in some ways, interactive media also are work. For both the user and the producer of their content, they offer intriguing ways to conceptualize what one does with the news of the day.

Introduction

Ask a child of the '90s why he or she likes to use a computer and the answer probably will boil down to: "Because it's fun." The child is, as usual, right. The computer can be absorbing and involving; it encourages choices and provides instant gratification for those choices. Most children (or adults, for that matter) may not think of the computer primarily as an information medium, though they probably do think of

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it as a form of entertainment. But the computer already is one of the most powerful and pervasive means of communication, and it is increasingly being used to deliver news in both the traditional sense of "information about major events" and the evolving sense of "information important to me." For example, 29 percent of the modem users responding to a recent Times-Mirror survey said they dialed up to get news, weather or sports at least "sometimes," and 11 percent said they "often" did so; 17 percent went online to play games at least occasionally (*The Role of Technology in American Life,* 1994).[1]

This article draws on William Stephenson's play theory of mass communication to examine some of the ways interactive or online media—media whose audience accesses content through a computer—affect approaches to the news by both consumers and producers.

Communication theorists recently have begun to turn their attention to online media, a form of communication still very much in the process of defining itself. A number of ideas about mediated communication, all of which evolved from the study of print and broadcast media, may prove fruitful. For instance, a "gatekeeper" approach, based on White's (1950) view of the decision-making process of selecting stories to include in the newspaper or broadcast program, might lead to questions about the journalist's role in an environment in which every individual can select desired information from a vast array.

An agenda-setting framework, stemming from McCombs and Shaw's (1972) research into the role of the media in shaping public thought processes about political and civic life, would raise the possibility of fragmentation of the democratic polity when each computer user can choose to see only those items that fit his or her own agenda of what it is important to think about. Those inclined toward the co-orientation model proposed by Chaffee and McLeod in the late 1960s might focus on a computer's ability to connect individuals and to find others of a like mind. Work in line with the knowledge-gap

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[1]The same study indicated that people who used online media were more likely than their demographic equivalents among non-users to say they enjoy keeping up with the news. Their news-seeking behavior appeared to support that statement. For instance, computer users were more apt to regularly read a newspaper, listen to radio news, read a news magazine and watch CNN; on the survey's political knowledge index, people who reported using modems were significantly more likely to earn a high score (four or five out of five questions correct) than were demographically equivalent non-users.

hypothesis, outlined a generation ago by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1970), would emphasize concerns about the widening gulf between those with access to the much-touted "information superhighway" and those without such access or the means to acquire it.

All these are valid theoretical approaches to interactive media and their potential effect on our society. But they do not quite get at the starting point, the heart of the matter: what the individual *does* with this new form of communication. One of the best ways to consider the holistic yet individualized nature of the online media experience may be the idea Stephenson explored in *The Play Theory of Mass Communication,* as well as other, earlier works: the idea that interacting with information is a fundamentally enjoyable thing to do. It is an idea rooted in his desire both to explore the complexity of the human mind and to consider psychological events in their totality (Logan, 1991).

Play Theory and Mass Communication

Stephenson, a physicist and a psychologist before becoming a communication scholar relatively late in life, drew on a variety of sources in a variety of fields in forming the concepts described in *Play Theory* (1988). Perhaps one of the most interesting of these sources exerted a somewhat indirect influence. Although social psychologist George Herbert Mead is not specifically cited in *Play Theory,* his views about the centrality of the self and the role of play in its formation are reflected in Stephenson's work.

Play, Mead said, particularly at the stage of development that precedes organized games, "is a play at something. A child plays at being a mother, at being a teacher, at being a policeman.... He has a set of stimuli which call out in himself the sort of responses they call out in others. He takes this group of responses and organizes them into a certain whole. Such is the simplest form of being another to one's self" (Mead, 1956, pp. 214-215). From this elementary or primitive form of play, the child progresses to the level of game-playing; here he must be prepared to take the attitude of everyone else involved in the game. The game "represents the passage in the life of the child from taking the role of others in play to the organized part that is essential to self-consciousness in the full sense of the term" (p. 216).

Mead saw the self, as molded by others, as an active force in the formation and control of behavior. We are both a result and a shaper of social processes. We interpret symbols so we can share meanings, and we use those shared meanings to create ourselves within the context

of our society. In effect, Mead said in *Mind, Self and Society* as well as in other works, we acquire the ability to think through social interaction; we define our roles in terms of others and thus are the product of at least some degree of social control (Meltzer, 1964).

Stephenson also saw the individual as central and the communication among individuals as a means to foster mutual socialization. His existentialist framework is based on the idea of the self as an active force, a doer rather than an object to which something is done. Yet he makes use of the idea of social control, as well, particularly in the ways that the formation of public opinion reaches deeply into individuals' belief systems (Brenner, 1972; Stephenson, 1988).

From Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, Stephenson more directly drew a number of ideas about play and, in particular, the view that play is pleasant, intrinsically rewarding—fun in and of itself, regardless of any other functions it may serve. Huizinga saw play as not only a social construction but a primary basis of civilization. "You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God," he said. "You can deny seriousness, but not play" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 3). Huizinga outlined several characteristics of play in his book *Homo Ludens*, characteristics Stephenson later applied to media use.[2] Among the characteristics of play described by Huizinga (1955) are the following:

• Play is voluntary. You cannot be ordered to play; if you are, the activity becomes something entirely different.

• Play is superfluous. It is never a task; "the need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need."

• Play is not "real life." It is "a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own". It is an interlude in our daily lives.

• Play is secluded or limited. It occurs within limits of time and place; it begins and ends. It is, in many ways, ritualistic: There are rules to the game.

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[2]In fact, one scholar well-versed in play theory has suggested that Stephenson may have borrowed Huizinga's ideas inappropriately. Not only was the Dutch historian unlikely to have applied his ideas to news reading, but he virtually ignored more unstructured aspects of play such as daydreaming or imagining, which fit Stephenson's theory well (Sutton-Smith, 1988).

● Play is absorbing. "Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid". While it is not itself serious, we take it seriously. (Huizinga, 1955, p. 8).

It is hardly surprising that when Stephenson, with these ideas in mind, turned his attention from psychology to communication, he was dismayed to find that theories relating to media use failed adequately to take into account that reading a newspaper is, well, fun. "What has to be explained about newsreading, fundamentally, is the *enjoyment* it engenders. Even bad news is enjoyed in the sense at least that *afterwards*, upon reflection, we can say that it was absorbing, interesting and enjoyed" (Stephenson, 1964, p. 368).

Instead, he found a scholarly world that took itself, and its subject, extremely seriously. While some theorists saw media use as at least potentially pleasurable, the pleasure had a purpose. People like to know what's going on in the world, or they like to escape, or they like to solve problems, or they simply like reassurance every morning that the world has survived another night (Stephenson, 1964). One of the most fully developed theories about media enjoyment came from Wilbur Schramm, who found it "self-evident" that people select news in expectation of a reward. That reward can be immediate or delayed, depending largely on the type of story, Schramm (1949) argued. "Crime and corruption, accidents and disasters, sports and recreation, social events, and human interest" news provides an immediate payoff: A reader "can enjoy a vicarious experience without any of the dangers or stresses involved" (p. 260). News of public affairs, the economy, social ills and the like is different; it "requires the reader to endure unpleasantness or annoyance (p. 261)" and is read "so that the reader may be informed and prepared" (p. 268).

Stephenson considered Schramm's view not only inadequate but overly moralistic, based as it was on Freudian pleasure and reality principles, which incorporate the idea that fantasy is a sign of incomplete socialization and cannot produce real gratification (Stephenson, 1988). With his own scholarly background in psychology, he was intrigued by the ideas of psychiatrist Thomas S. Szasz. Szasz viewed pleasure as, in part, a communication concept, expressing the idea that the relationship between the people involved is satisfying; nothing further is wanted or needed. Pain, in contrast, is a command for action, for a change in the *status quo* (Szasz, 1957).

The self and its freedom to choose, Stephenson (1988) regarded as key to understanding media use. "The daily withdrawal of people into

the mass media ... is a step in the *existential* direction, that is, a matter of subjectivity which invites freedom where there had been little or none before" (p. 45). Reading the news also has all the earmarks of play identified by Huizinga. It is voluntary. It is a temporary interlude in the day, satisfying in and of itself. It is absorbing. It is both structured and disjointed, with the attributes of a game in the rules and self-consciousness it deploys. However, the activity also is pleasurable for its own sake: Through reading the news, through converting the media's "information" to our private ends (see Ingenthron, 1988), we gain something. We enhance our selves. "The self in enlarged" in the process, so "the person can thrust forward a little for himself, to self-stride" (Stephenson, 1988, p. 159).

The Application of Play Theory to Online Media

When Stephenson died in 1989, online or computer-based media were only just beginning to garner anything resembling a sizable audience. One can only speculate what he might have had to say about the Internet and the World Wide Web, or a vast database such as the one offered by Nexis/Lexis, or a commercial online service such as America Online or Prodigy. But speculation can be a form of communication pleasure, too.

For starters, one can return to the child's insight that using a computer is, above all, lots of fun. Many adults also seem to view the computer as a toy for grown-ups and commonly describe their use of it as "playing" even when they're actively seeking or retrieving information. Stephenson points to certain media as encouraging a "pure play" attitude, with formats and layouts that encourage readers to browse, to wander, to let themselves be diverted or captivated by something new or unusual (Stephenson, 1988).

Online media, with their almost limitless variety and their capacity to continually modify their content, are naturally attractive for people who find this form of play appealing. One only has to glance at the materials initially used to market commercial online media to see results of in-house research that uncovered exactly this attitude. America Online's early promotional package urged newcomers to "explore hundreds of services." The Prodigy service's "Welcome New Member" screen stressed the joys of exploration and promised "something for everyone."

Moreover, the way we use the medium comprises an inherently playful interaction in and of itself. We hit a key or click a mouse and

get a response, a reward, a reaffirmation of our existence and a gratification of our desires. And although we may not know exactly what we're going to get, which can add to our playful attitude of exploration and the pleasant air of mystery involved in news reading, we quickly come to expect that we'll get *something*; hence our often-unreasonable level of annoyance when a computer bug gets in the way of the instant gratification to which we become so quickly accustomed. Our disappointment and anger may be quite childish, but they are real.

This type of unstructured, exploratory media use corresponds to Stephenson's "primitive" form of subjective play in news reading, in which the "feebly socialized" reader enjoys getting isolated tidbits of news. At this level, he says, "one reads one thing at one moment, and another at another, and what one reads at one moment has no relation to what is read at another" (Stephenson, 1964, p. 369). A more developed type of news-reading play—appealing to a more sophisticated reader—is closer to a game, in which the reader can self-consciously pursue his or her orderly way through "a complex subjective minuet." The reader knows where to find things and derives pleasure from the ability to find them, in the same place, every day. In fact, a newspaper that appeals to this type of game player, but deviates from the rules implied by its regular format and therefore "fails to make it easy for a reader to play easily ... is a spoil-sport" (Stephenson, 1964, pp. 369-371).

But here, online media encounter some problems. One of the early challenges in developing interactive information services was to communicate what they contain and help people easily find what they want—or what they may not know they want but might be happy to see if they came across it, a serendipity that is easier in a medium that, say, always puts its international news on Page 3. It is a challenge that has yet to be definitively overcome, even with the World Wide Web's exponentially expanding hyperlinks. In Stephenson's terms, borrowed from systematic psychology, the issue relates to *apperception*, or the readiness to perceive something in relation to existing interests. The individual, says Stephenson, is "a complex of interests, all active and vibrant, with feelers out all the time ... ready to receive instantly whatever ties in with a prior interest" (Stephenson, 1988, pp. 149-150). Certainly, the computer caters to individual apperception, rather than the apperception of a generalized mass audience, in the sense that users can specifically and actively identify what they want to see, as discussed below. But it also poses a related danger. If we don't know

what else is available, those "feelers" can easily be stymied.

The fact is that online information exists for a reader only upon request—and, unless action is taken to "save" certain material, only fleetingly at that. Menu structures may be the closest approximation of a truly permanent and easy-to-find location, and online media, notably commercial ones such as Prodigy, use them extensively. But menus have proved a restrictive and cumbersome form of navigation, and attempt to impose the rules of one game—that of reading a printed page, the same page read by thousands of other individuals—on a different game altogether. Rules better suited to the computer are evolving. It seems likely that the structure people find important will be available, but it will be a structure they choose or even design themselves—a skill that they, unlike their children, may not yet have mastered, as witness the Web's often-baffling mesh of mishmashed links and references.

Ironically, it is to the type of mature reader who is more apt to enjoy a structured game than a bit of pure, unorganized play that the commercial online services initially were marketed, largely for the very practical reason that, at first, it was this type of person—better educated, employed in a job involving computer use, more likely to read a "traditional" newspaper—who owned or had access to a personal computer. One reason for the relatively slow growth of online media through the 1980s may be that their target audience was turned off by the comparative lack of recognizable rules with which to "play" the new game. Only recently has the home computer's diffusion curve begun to extend to those who may find its inherent element of unpredictability more appealing, as witness the soaring usage numbers for the World Wide Web, a chaotic environment if ever there was one.

If interactive media have a hard time with a structure that will appeal to all the individuals making up a mass audience, they are perfect for a structure that will appeal to a single individual making up an audience of one. When it comes to conscious self-actualization, online services are the superstars of the information business. Stephenson's focus, as an advertising researcher as well as a communication theorist, was on individual members of a mass audience. He was particularly interested in "convergent selectivity," the convergence of one person on one object ... an object for sale, for instance. In the experience of convergent selection lies heightened self-awareness: One is a free person in front of a TV set, or with a newspaper in one's hands, to a degree never before achieved (Stephenson, 1988).

A newspaper comes to your door in a pre-packaged form. It contains what someone else has deemed appropriate. You choose which

bits of information to pay attention to; your news-reading behavior is voluntary and individualistic, elements that distinguish it from the work others require of you (Stephenson, 1988). But the range of choices available with any one paper or television news program is predetermined and, relative to the choices available through a computer, severely limited. A person using an online medium has far more decisions to make—or, as Stephenson would have it, far more opportunities to exercise and enhance the self. Services such as America Online offer thousands of information items; databases such as Dialog or a network of networks such as the Internet, millions.

Here is the essence of convergent selectivity, the object of which is to let each person choose, thus enriching self-reference and the individual aspects of the self. Convergent selectivity concerns new or non-customary modes of behavior, which give us opportunities to exist for ourselves (Stephenson, 1988). Control is in the hands of the individual, who takes a conscious, self-enhancing action to select what he or she wants. Though that concept is in line with the uses and gratifications theory of communication, Stephenson goes beyond the somewhat simplistic level of need fulfillment in an effort to get to the pleasure derived from the act of news reading itself. A key attribute of online media is the user's ability to personalize them, to create the most personally pleasing structure out of the nearly infinite possible combinations and arrangements of content.

News reading is, of itself, a great skill, "with which the reader creates his own order, commanding his own grasp of things in the world" (Stephenson, 1988, p. 158). The computer makes that skill a necessity. Not only is the audience member an active participant in the communication process, as visualized by play theory, but without that active participation, there is no communication at all. One has to hit the buttons and continually make choices about which buttons to hit. Even browsing or exploring requires conscious decision-making and action not required by other media.

Yet this facet of encouraging, even requiring, individuality in the choice of online behavior may have different effects on different types of news readers. In his studies of news reading, Stephenson identified three basic types of people. Two already have been described: the reader with a "pure play" attitude, who tends to think of news reading as entertainment, and the more mature reader for whom reading the news is a habitual, structured daily interlude. Stephenson calls the third type a "non-pleasure" reader; this person, if he or she reads at all, has a more utilitarian view of the process than the other two (Stephenson,

1964, 1988). It may be that forcing at least these readers to consciously narrow their interests and to actively define what they're seeking leads them to see their use of interactive media as a purposeful activity designed to retrieve specific content. They may see it, in other words, as "work."

Work, characterized by communication pain, is the flip side of play, characterized by communication pleasure. Work, said Stephenson, is not disinterested. It is not an interlude in the day. It produces things—goods, services, ideas—by application of effort for a purpose. It commands effort; it demands that something be done or, as Szasz (1957) put it, that relief from a painful experience be provided. As such, it involves a certain negation of self-existence (Stephenson, 1988).

Just as play, communication pleasure and convergent selectivity are linked, so are work, communication pain and social control. Social control, Stephenson (1988) says, involves ethical needs and moral injunctions; these stem from internalized beliefs and values that are difficult, if not impossible, to change. Social control induces conformity, consensus and established custom.

Stephenson uses the formation of public opinion as a typical example of social control. In terms of interactive media, the concept opens up the intriguing question, well worth future study, of how public opinion is affected by an ability to share one's views with all the other members of an online community. Surely the process becomes more self-enhancing if people feel that they are taking an active role in it. And the extended online debates over all sorts of issues of contemporary concern seem largely to be entered into in a manner best described as playful—verbal flaming swordplay, perhaps, but play nonetheless. Or do online media simply make reference groups more accessible, without diminishing the groups' controlling power to shape individual opinion?

Perhaps participation in online news discussion groups—as opposed to the simple act of gathering and reading news online—offers a unique blend of experiences that draws on both individual choice and social integration. Indeed, obtaining "news" online is often an act both of active individual choice and active group participation, in contrast with the more passive social aspects of traditional media, in which one is a receiver but not a provider of information shaped by a shared culture. This duality merits further exploration in terms of play theory; it eventually may prompt us into a reconsideration of the interconnections between convergent selectivity and social control.

Stephenson's distinction between a mass and a public audience also

has potential value. The latter, he claims, is concerned with issues and controversies; the goal of a public meeting is to reach consensus. A mass audience, on the other hand, is made up of isolated individuals with an opportunity to think as they please. Although the message itself may be undifferentiated, what the receiver does with it is personal (Stephenson, 1988). Yet the "mass" audience for online media does not really exist. Not only is the medium itself subject to manipulation by each individual, as described above, but each individual also is part of the online community. Anyone can communicate directly with anyone else.

If the mass is not isolated, it becomes, perhaps, a public. And the question becomes whether that newly defined public is about consensus or individuality—or both. Social communication maintains and reinforces social control, Stephenson (1988) says. But, again, it is possible that the nature of the social communication is fundamentally altered by a media forum that accommodates individual input, as well as the individual selection of output allowed (to a lesser extent) by more traditional media. Here, certainly, is an additional issue for study.

Such questions give rise to another of Stephenson's distinctions, this one between communication, which is a subjective matter, and the more objective nature of information. What earlier studies missed, Stephenson noted, is that communication is carried on in play, with all of play's accompanying opportunities for self-enhancement. "The communication situation is not one in which information is passed from a communication source to a receiver. It is one in which the individual plays with communication" (Stephenson, 1988, p. 151).

The interactivity of online media immediately blurs the line between communication and information; it's even difficult to decide in which category such media belong. Do they deliver information or facilitate communication? Are they mass media or interpersonal ones: Is the flow one-to-many or one-to-one—or, as online sources proliferate and every user realizes his or her ability to don the hat of an information provider, many-to-one? Is soliciting comments from a colleague on the Internet a communication function or an information one? How about joining an online news group discussion? Even the straightforward process of retrieving a news item involves communication between individual and machine, with all the self-enhancing characteristics of that interaction already described.

Though it is unlikely that the developers of commercial online services such as America Online are familiar with Stephenson's theory per se, their market research and, perhaps, their instincts have pushed

them toward an emphasis on the medium's communicative aspects. Those instincts are supported by the actions of subscribers, who have gravitated toward the communication functions, although news and other information sections of these services also have been popular. Developers rightly perceive those interactive attributes as a key element that differentiates their product from traditional media.

One other aspect of play theory deserves attention for its potential applicability to online media. With Stephenson's view of the media as elements of socialization and his idea that culture develops in play (Stephenson, 1988), one comes full circle back to Mead and his idea about the formation of self and society, and to Huizinga and his belief that play explains civilizations. In fact, Stephenson once wrote that in our "playful" reading of the news as it relates to the formation of culture lay the primary importance of his theory. Truth is hard to find; the media are buried in their own cultural milieus. Yet our news reading provides the freedom "to see through the cultural conditioning of news. It is not just that he [the news reader] becomes more penetrating in thought, but merely that he can at times *exist*, as a child does when he freely plays, and thus, every now and then, be free to push to one side the trappings of what everyone else swears is the truth" (Stephenson, 1964, p. 374).

The computer redefines community, the foundation of culture. Communities of interests—or, if one prefers, apperceptions—have become arguably more important to those who use interactive media than communities of place. The change can be liberating. It allows people to choose not only what they will see and do in this new community, but who they will be. They can select which online communities to join and even pick a different persona to fit each one. But as the online existential choices increase (for some members of society), the effects on the "offline" world must be kept in mind. Computers make it easier to interact with others who are like ourselves, however we choose to define that similarity—and to ignore those who are not. If the change has the potential to increase individual freedom, it also has the potential to be constricting and confining. In illuminating one culture through our subjective play, we must be careful not to render another invisible.

Implications for Those Involved in Online Media

The play theory of mass communication offers both good and bad news for those who now are developing and producing online media. On the

one hand, it provides an explanation of why people will want to use these media: They're fun, they're self-enhancing, they're actively involving and immediately rewarding. And, as audience demographics change and the children of today become the media users and producers of tomorrow, they're likely to become bigger and better. But play theory also highlights problems to be addressed, problems as specific as how to find a news story online and as broad as how to shape our culture.

In particular, play theory offers insights of vital importance to the journalists now working in "traditional" print and broadcast media who, for the most part, have been slow to grasp either the challenges or the opportunities the new forms of communication offer. News content providers might benefit by freeing their imaginations from constraints imposed by existing formats and recognizing aspects of the audience's use of interactive media that differ from the use of text on a printed page or images on a television screen—including the inherent "playfulness" of using a computer. Too many of the journalistic ventures into online media, such as the "videotex" failures of the mid-1980s, started with the idea of an electronic newspaper—hence, for instance, the lingering prevalence of the cumbersome navigational devices described above. They never progressed to a creative exploration of the unique attributes of a fundamentally different medium. The problem persists with many of today's online offerings, with what critics have derisively called "shovelware," or "new" media products created by shoveling the content of a printed newspaper (or television script) into electronic packages (Thalhimer, 1994).

To put it another way, journalists who opt to "play" more might recognize the pleasures to be derived from interactive media, then explore what they bring to the party. They can learn how to facilitate and further those pleasures while continuing to serve the public.

In doing so, journalists likely will recognize that online media mean yielding some of their authority over what is "news" and what goes into the formation of "public opinion." The individual, the axis around which all of Stephenson's ideas revolve, will use both the medium and the content it carries in whatever way he or she chooses. But rather than excluding the journalist, this development can be seen as a way to bridge the gap between journalist and audience. Instead of mediating between two separate communities—the newsmaker and the news consumer—the press becomes a part of a single online community, a participant in the ongoing process of self-actualization.

Thinking about the best way to serve a community of which one is

an active member entails a different mind set from thinking about a community of which one is a permanent observer but never a participant. Given the much-ballyhooed evidence of a growing public dissatisfaction with an aloof, out-of-touch press—manifested by a steady decline in newspaper readership relative to the nation's population, among other trends with disturbing implications both for the press and for society—such a gestalt perceptual switch might well be welcomed with enthusiasm by members of the media community.

This development does not mean the press has a less important role in society. It merely means that role is changing. For instance, if a strength of the new medium is the fact that users can personalize it and capitalize on its opportunities for self-actualization, the press can find ways to help them do so. Some media already are showing signs of returning to the community they serve, seeking to understand its needs and find better ways to meet them. The *Wichita* (KS) *Eagle* project, which involved readers in making news decisions (Ashe, 1992), is only one of a growing number of examples of the effort to make the news process more participatory—more, as Stephenson would have it, self-enhancing. Interactive media offer unlimited opportunities to extend such forays.

Just two examples may suffice, one of design and the other of content. Concerning the former, journalists might seek to organize and present their stories in ways that can encourage both serendipity and structure, accommodating the person who enjoys "subjective" play as well as the one who prefers reliable, recognizable rules to the game. Steps in this direction can be seen on the Web, with its hypertext links, and on commercial online services, which incorporate prompts in various sections to let users know what else is available. On the content side, journalists might concentrate on being a source of contextual information, so that the choices available to an individual will include not just reports of what happened but informed discussions (to which public, press and policy maker all can contribute) of what the event means to various community constituents.

Journalists, in other words, can continue to be journalists: better ones, more creative ones and more playful ones, in Stephenson's self-referential sense of the word. In doing so, they may find opportunities to be in closer touch not only with the fundamental aspects of what they do themselves, but also with the ways in which their readers act and react. Such connections will become increasingly important as the lines among participants in the media process blur and as control shifts to the individual. Perhaps most important, journalists can take a lesson from their children: Yes, this *is* fun.

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