

Suellen S. Adams
University of Rhode Island

Information at Play: The Role of Information Behavior and Meaning-Making

Abstract: This paper relates to the conference in the area of user studies. It examines the similarities of information behavior and meaning making in 4 studies of adult play environments. It will also make a case for the importance of studying information behavior and meaning-making in play environments. One of these studies is now complete, the other three are ongoing, though two of these are nearly complete.

Résumé : Cette communication porte sur l'étude des utilisateurs et examine les similitudes entre le comportement informationnel et la formulation de sens dans quatre études sur les environnements de jeu pour adultes. Elle justifie par ailleurs l'importance d'étudier les comportements informationnels et la formulation de sens en environnement de jeu. Une de ces études est déjà complétée, les autres sont toujours en cours dont deux qui sont quasi terminées.

Traditionally when we have examined information behavior or information practices, we have studied it in light of people's work or in terms of what most might consider major life events. Even in the case of what is termed Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS), we have seen studies on women pregnant with twins (McKenzie 2002), teachers and blue collar workers (Savolainen 1995), older adults (Williamson 1998), workers in a particular organization (Huotari & Chatman 2001), and people in support groups, pregnant women, and children (Carey, McKechnie & McKenzie 2001) to name just a few. All of these studies and myriad others reflect information practices in important facets of people's lives, but with a few notable exceptions there has been very little on information practices in leisure pursuits, and virtually nothing on information practices related to play.

Yet play is an important element of life, not only for children, but for adults as well. There is a tendency, when we are thinking of adults to think of work and important life events as central and to trivialize the importance of play in adult life. It is important to study play or any leisure activity, because oftentimes it is the "expressive" activities, as opposed to the "instrumental" ones, which are important to the meaning of and satisfaction with an individual's daily life, particularly his or her work life. Csikszentmihalyi (1981) points out that, although there seems to be an implicit assumption that the meaning of leisure grows out of work, in fact the opposite may very well be true. "Thus it could be argued that the most basic meaning of work and other instrumental activities is naturally determined by reference to meanings developed in leisure settings rather than vice-versa." (p. 333).

Researchers in other fields concerned with social meaning making and identity, such as some areas in sociology and psychology have spent considerably more time in the study of play environments. Notable examples are Turkle's (1984,1994,1997) examinations of identity in computer environments and Zurcher's (1982) dramaturgical analysis of coaches, players and fans in college football. However research in meaning making can enhance and be enhanced by work in information behavior.

In the last several years I have been studying various types of play by adults. I have so far considered information behavior and meaning-making in virtual play spaces (massive multiplayer online role-playing games and single player role-playing games) and serious recreational athletes (athletes themselves and information gatekeepers for those athletes). Qualitative methods were used in all cases, though they varied somewhat from case to case. Data collection was accomplished in various ways, including participant observation, review of websites and in-depth interviews. Analysis was, in most cases, accomplished through the identification of categories from the data. In one instance dramaturgical analysis was applied.

Findings also varied, but some interesting parallels emerged both in information practices and in meanings made. Parallels appear in two areas of information behavior and in one area of meaning making.

There are similarities in how both video gamers and athletes find information to aid in the success of their play endeavors. In both cases the methods of finding information follow the more informal levels of a variety of ELIS models. One particularly useful model of information practices in these cases is MacKenzie's (2002) two-dimensional model of information practices. While formal sources of information exist, participants in both of these types of play, tend to rely on these sources to only a limited extent. Instead they rely on scanning for the information in their environments, serendipity and simply being informed by someone else. While there are a wide variety of sources available, even within a more informal realm, the participants tend to look to people first for their information. In fact, word of mouth, either from intermediaries or fellow participants seems to be the most used source. Interestingly, at least some participants construe the sorts of Internet sources they use as "just another type of word of mouth," as their most common sources are forums, message boards, and so on, which are peopled primarily by participants in play like themselves, and with formal or informal intermediaries.

The other factor that arises from the information practices of players is trust. Who or what do participants trust to assist with their success in these situations? How do they choose whom to trust? While this factor is still being considered and analyzed, it appears that one of the biggest factors in the cases of play I have so far examined is perceived success. In face-to-face circumstances success may be relatively easy to judge, however it can be somewhat more difficult in the case of online "word of mouth" sources to determine success. One strategy for athletes has been using face-to-face intermediaries or gatekeepers to help make these determinations (as well as for other information).

There also seem to be some implications in play environments that people are making meanings about themselves and their personal and social identities. This making of meaning surrounding play is tied up with several information issues. For instance, the choices people are constrained to in a video game environment in terms of representation of the self on-screen and the feedback information supplied by the game designers may have an effect on self-understanding both in and outside the game. Research also shows that people make self-efficacy decisions based on in-game happenings (Lee, 2000). People in the athlete studies also talk about changes in personal and social identity and self-efficacy, at least some of which is a result of having gained enough information to feel competent. In both cases, the changes are

framed in terms of how the participants identify themselves. This could be a strong identification with a powerful character in online play. Or in the case of the recreational athletes, a subtle but important shift in identity from someone who “does” (I run sometimes) to someone who “is” (I am a runner), which implies a sense of competence.

This presentation and paper will begin to explore the parallels in information seeking and meaning-making made manifest in four studies of play. Further, it will discuss some particulars of how we as a field might go forward in the study of various forms of play and the subtleties of information interaction and meaning-making in play environments. And finally, it will explore some possible implications for the provision of information in play and elsewhere.

References

- Carey, R.F., McKechnie, L.E.F & McKenzie, P. (2001). Gaining access to everyday life information seeking. *Library & information science research* 23(4), 319-334.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1981). Leisure and socialization. *Social forces*, 60(2). 332-340.
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play element in culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Huotari, M.L. & Chatman, E. (2001) Using everyday life information seeking to explain organizational behavior. *Library and information science research* 23(4), 351-366.
- Lee, K. M. (2000). MUD and self efficacy. *Educational media international*. 177-183.
- McKenzie, P. J. (2002) A model of information practices in accounts of everyday-life information seeking. *Journal of documentation* 59(1), 19-40.
- Savolainen, R. (1995). Everyday life information seeking: Approaching information seeking in the context of “way of life.” *Library & information science research* 17(3), 259-294.
- Turkle, S, 1997. Computational technologies and images of the self. *Social Research*, v64 n3 p1093(19).
- Turkle, S. (1994). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Turkle, S. (1984). *The second self: Computers and the human spirit*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Zurcher, L.A. (1982). The Staging of Emotion: A Dramaturgical Analysis. *Symbolic Interaction*, 5(1), p.1-22.