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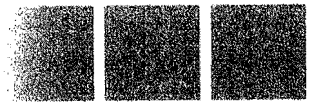

DISCOURSE 2.0
Language and New Media

Deborah Tannen and Anna Marie Trester, Editors

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2

Polities and Politics of Ongoing Assessments: Evidence from Video-Gaming and Blogging

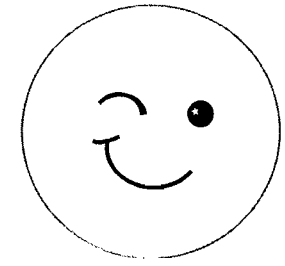
HERVÉ VARENNE, GILLIAN "GUS" ANDREWS, AARON CHIA-YUAN HUNG, AND SARAH WESSLER
Teachers College, Columbia University

Prologue

> But the point is that between what Ryle calls the "thin description" of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twitcher . . .) is doing ("rapidly contracting his right eyelids") and the "thick description" of what he is doing ("practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion") lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form twitches, which, as a cultural category, are as much nonwinks as winks are nontwitches) in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids. (Geertz 1973, 7)

THIS MOST FAMOUS of Geertz's flights of anthropological writing introduces what he labels an "interpretive theory of culture." It eventually led him and many of his students to radical skepticism about the possibility of anthropology, and—he would have added—sociology, linguistics, conversational analysis. At about the same time Garfinkel, Sacks, and others argued that social life with its twitches and winks is "discoverable . . . not imaginable" (Garfinkel 2002, 96). The analyst need not interpret because, in the real life of sheep raids, school classrooms, and video game playing, a muscular event around the eye is always twitch *or* wink, for *these* people, at *this* time, and for *this* political purpose. Anyone who follows the publicizing of this event will know how it *was* taken if only because of the controversy, or lack thereof, about the event.

No spasms occur without the consequences of the ongoing assessment of the spasm.



Introduction

The term "assessment" has several histories. We consider three, given our desire to build more robust analytic tools to identify what we call the emerging polities of any assessment. In everyday life, people continually find themselves establishing the practical import of earlier statements or moves (or discovering that some *thing* has happened). They find themselves meting out consequences or living with consequences others are meting out. And then everyone has to deal with what has happened.[1] We are thus also concerned with the politics of any assessment. As it happens, new technologies offer interesting cases for exploring these classical issues.[2] The affordances of video games and blogging both expand and disrupt interactional processes in ways that may help us trace more carefully how the distant, in time and place, enters into the here and now, as well as how the here and now can transform, or not, the distant.

The several speech communities or, in our vocabulary, "speech polities" that have made their history around the term "assessment" are quite distinct. The term appears extensively in the discursive traditions of schooling, mental health, and conversational analysis. There is little overlap in the literatures that trace the development, uses, and controversies surrounding the term. But all three address the issue of figuring out what happened to allow an act or a person to be identified as *this* or *that*. They are all in the business of assessing whether a spasm was a twitch or a wink, of fitting this assessment within a political process of significance for a particular polity, and then of justifying consequences. But the differences in the placing of assessment in each tradition bring out fundamental matters. In the worlds of clinical psychology and schooling, the concern with assessing a child individually can be traced, among other sources, and somewhat ironically to John Dewey's belief that "the child's own instincts and powers furnish . . . the starting point for all education" (1959, 20). This leads to the question that keeps moving clinical psychology and schooling: How do we figure out what those instincts and powers might be?

In conversational analysis and ethnomethodology, the term "assessment" may have first appeared in a paper by Harvey Sacks on "police assessment of moral character" (1972) which had been titled, when it was first written in 1965, "Methods in Use for the Production of a Social Order" (1972, 280). Sacks's paper, for many, showed a way that might allow us to trace how instincts and powers are identified but with no concern as to whether these are real outside the settings in which they are identified, or for other purposes than those constituted by the activities of the participants in the settings. These methodological strictures have made conversational analysis of limited value for clinical and school assessors. *Their* task is not analytic but political. They are responsible for producing assessments so powerful that a person's career may be changed. To fulfill this political task, assessors must do it in just such a way as to establish that the assessment is independent of setting or assessor—as the particular polities who might challenge the assessment understand "independence." This political responsibility, of course, places clinical and school assessors in a kind of Catch-22: they must produce social orders that abstract their own social characteristics as they discriminate in the technical, statistical sense.

Various social scientific traditions in anthropology and sociology have established that abstracting the social to reach the real is fundamentally impossible. But few before Sacks—and Garfinkel, of course—had systematically looked at the methods by which routine assessments are made in the daily life of any profession and then used their findings as a way to address the classical issues. In 1973 Geertz was rather typical in his reaction to the evidence that classifications of actions and people, as well as the related consequences, were indefinitely multiple—the occasion for controversy, debate, power plays, if not violence (symbolic or otherwise). Anthropologists in general were altogether convinced, as they continue to be, that it would be impossible to reach universally valid classifications of people or acts, or to invent methods for producing these. As Lévi-Strauss said, "natural species are not chosen [as totems] because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think'" (1966, 89). This would apply, as he argued in his next work (Lévi-Strauss 1966), to all classifications, including, of course, the classification of psychological "instincts and powers."[3]

But Geertz did not trust any of the then-extant methods to establish how any assessment, anywhere, is done, and Lévi-Strauss does not appear to have been much interested in the matter.[4] Sociologists documented how social consequences are distributed in ways that correlate with any number of classifications (including social class, race, ethnicity, gender). But the exact way these correlations are produced, in the details of everyday lives, remained obscure.

In contrast, Sacks, Garfinkel, their colleagues and students (Pomerantz 1984; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987, 1992), as well as those who were inspired by their work, started giving us a sense of how, for example, a child becomes known as "not knowing how to read" or as "having" or "being with" this or that clinical label (McDermott 1993; Mehan 1996; Mehan, Hertwerk, and Meihls 1986). We seek to continue this work by exploring the linkages between routine assessments and the extraordinary ones that may transform a person's status and her relationships. We are concerned, to paraphrase Garfinkel (1956), with "successful" (de)gradation moments when a spasm is determined to be a twitch, a wink, or a sign that the performer is sick, funny, dangerous, or any *thing* else. Conversational analysis and ethnomethodology have often been criticized for their apparent failure to address significant social processes affecting masses rather than the immediate participants in a local event (Bourdieu 1990; Gellner 1975; Hanks 1996). Many researchers in these fields have demonstrated otherwise, if not quite convincingly. Given the methodological strictures for conversational analysis, it can be difficult to show the linkages between a particular conversational exchange and the general conditions that make it *this* kind of exchange rather than another. It can be even more difficult to link the exchange to its consequences. It can be particularly hard to specify the people, or polity, who have participated in setting the conditions or in meting out consequences.

The set of research projects on which we report here were designed to contribute to the further development of the analytic tools needed to help us trace, in detail, how people get entangled into large-scale historical processes. We start the chapter with a brief illustration of our concerns by reporting on an expert child taking over the controls of a video game from an incompetent adult. We continue with a more detailed analysis of a similar case, in which a group of four video game players han-

dles the incompetence of one of them. Our goal is to move away from a concern with differentiated individual competence so that the focus can be placed instead on the host of others who set the stage for the *particular* issues about which the person might then be assessed as being either expert or incompetent. The third case study traces the sequencing of apparent errors in blog comments. By exploring various indices internal to the technologies, we demonstrate that gaming and blogging are interactional processes that bring together people from various walks of life. Whatever their personal or professional interests, these people must, however briefly, live with what each has created and with the consequences. In conclusion, we suggest that a similar approach would help us understand what can happen when assessments, in school or clinics, are not matters of game.

"Marta Can't Play": Assessments and Consequences

The setting for the first case study is that of a video game design camp for children and adolescents. In her pilot research, Wessler was present when a competitive game was played between two teams in different parts of the country. Each team had to include both children and adults. In this instance Marta—the adult, and one of the teachers—had never played the game *Counter-Strike: Source*. This game is a first-person multiplayer shooting game and Marta was altogether uncomfortable with the genre.[5] But she had to be one of the players. This meant that her body had to face the monitor and her hands had to control keyboard and mouse. She did have a child advisor, Brad, sitting at her side. Brad was heavily invested in winning the game and kept telling her, "Click," "Move left," or "Shoot!" As the game progressed, telling became yelling as more and more of the adult's moves were assessed by the child as being "wrong." In fact, and as their team began to lose, little by little the child took over mouse and keyboard and the adult sat back and watched.

Things came to a head toward the end of the game. The team was down 2–0 and—partially because of her incompetence—Marta was still alive and all but one of the other players had died. It was her job to protect the other player, but she did not know that. At that point, at least four other students were now watching Marta, instructing her, and assessing what should be done next.[6]

8 ROMA: [to Marta] *Now look to your right, look to your right!*
9 FEFFER: [to Marta] *Turn your mouse to your right*
10 ROMA: [to Marta] *Turn your mouse to the right*
11 MR. AWESOME: *Your right*
12 FEFFER: *A little bit more Marta!*
13 ROMA: *Marta turn your mouse! Turn your mouse!*
14 MUNCHKIN: *Turn!*
15 MR. AWESOME: *Turn right!*
16 ROMA: *Your mouse!* [Laughs]
17 FEFFER: *Turn your mouse to turn Marta!*
18 MR. AWESOME: *Yeah!*

19 MARTA: *Where?*
20 MR. AWESOME: *Go!*
21 ROMA: *Yo someone should totally* [quietly] *go play for Marta* [Laughs].
22 MR. AWESOME: [Claps Hands] *Ooooh!* [Groans in frustration].

The team lost.

Formally the event, as it progressed, involved two kinds of assessments. The first consisted of assessments of the two previous statements in a sequence of (1) "game as it has progressed so far" (S1), (2) "keyboard move in response to S1" (S2), and (3) "instruction on how to move next" (S3). The second type of assessment was a totalizing one summarizing all the moves-so-far and leading to a change in social organization: the adult is incompetent and cannot be trusted to win the game; she should be replaced. The first kind of assessments could be discussed in terms of turn-taking and adjacency pairs. These are the assessments that concerned Mehan in his work on classroom lessons (1979). The second kind of assessments takes us on to matters like those Sacks investigated in his paper on a joke's telling (1974). We are concerned with the game's playing, but with a twist. We are looking at what can happen *after* it has been assessed that the joke was told incorrectly, or a game was played badly. Sacks did not explore this latter stage specifically. But we can imagine that in joking as in gaming, one's authority to "joke/play next" may change as one's capabilities are assessed *for this new purpose and this polity.*

Formally, we have observed these assessments thus far:

1. The previous move was wrong and next move should be this; and
2. The player is incompetent and the next game should be played by another player.

But, in the instance Wessler studied, there actually is a *third* level of assessment that encompasses these narrower assessments. At a summer camp that is for these intents and purposes a School, a teacher's incompetence at playing video games has *no consequences* on her status as Teacher.[7] Some might find it strange that a teacher in a technology camp should be so incompetent in comparison to the students.[8] Our own concern is to explore the implications of two types of assessments that identify performance within whole ritualized sequences as *this* rather than *that.* There are assessments that, possibly temporarily, indicate a participant is, say, incompetent, *but are of little consequence in terms of future participation.* And there are other assessments that reconstitute much earlier assessments that, say, a person is now Teacher for certain intents and purposes. In such cases the local participants have little power to change the relationship that may make some teachers and some students. In such cases even the assessment that a particular teacher was incompetent may be surprising precisely *because* the person was, is, and will be a Teacher—for all relevant intents and purposes.[9] But, of course, at other times, within other polities, under different circumstances, a person might lose the status of Teacher if she were to be fired from her position.

Not-So-Personal Assessing Instructions

Our second case study builds on Aaron Hung's recent work (Hung 2011). The case is that of four youths from Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking areas of China playing various video games in New York City. Hung made a three-and-one-half-hour video recording of their playing. During one of the games, *Super Smash Brothers Melee,* the four organized themselves into two competing teams. There was a problem, however. Three of the four (Andrew, Jason, and Kevin) were expert players, and were boys. The fourth (Li) had never played the game, was a girl, and often complained that the boys were not playing fair. She was also primarily a Mandarin speaker, and the boys were primarily Cantonese speakers. She and one of the boys seemed to be in the early stages of some kind of relationship. At the time the status of their relationship was not clearly stated, but it may explain why she was present on that day. Still, her main attribute, for the purpose of game playing, may have been that she could serve as the needed fourth player. The three boys would just have to make do with her other characteristics.

Making do, of course, revealed which of the characteristics made what kind of difference. As they played, all four also assessed what was going wrong and attempted to correct it so that they could continue playing. At certain times the characteristic that mattered was the Cantonese-Mandarin divide. This one appears to have been dealt with easily enough.[10] Most bothersome was the girl's lack of expertise and the moves she was making, or failing to make. We focus on the latter and particularly on the organization of the assessments and instructions that the other players gave her. In brief, the three boys shifted from expressions of dismay to a delegation of instructional duties. After a while, one of the boys took it upon himself to be the chief instructor when the need arose. As he did so, two subsidiary issues appeared to make the most difference. One had to do with the manipulation of the buttons on the controller. The other had to do with the interpretation of the heads-up displays on the screen. It took the boys a while, for example, to figure out that the girl interpreted an increase in one of the indices as a sign that she was winning when just the opposite was the case:

LI: *Damn! I went from 130 something to 0!*

ANDREW: *It is not good to have a higher number.* (Hung 2011, 100)[11]

Figure 2.2 is a screenshot taken while the game was being played. There are four numbers at the bottom, presented as percentages. Even expert players are not quite sure what they are percentages of, or what is the range (given that it can go over 100 percent). These matters may be explained somewhere in the manual, but knowing them does not appear to have an impact on the game. What does have an impact is figuring out which of the four figures represent one's performance, whether an increase is good or bad, and whether the other players are doing better or worse than oneself. Expert players do track all four figures. Li had not yet figured it all out. For observers, what is most noteworthy here is that the numbers are not a matter of interpretation or negotiation as far as playing *this* game is concerned.[12] The girl had to accept that *this* was the "it" she had to attend to. If she did not, then she was not playing, and no playing could take place.

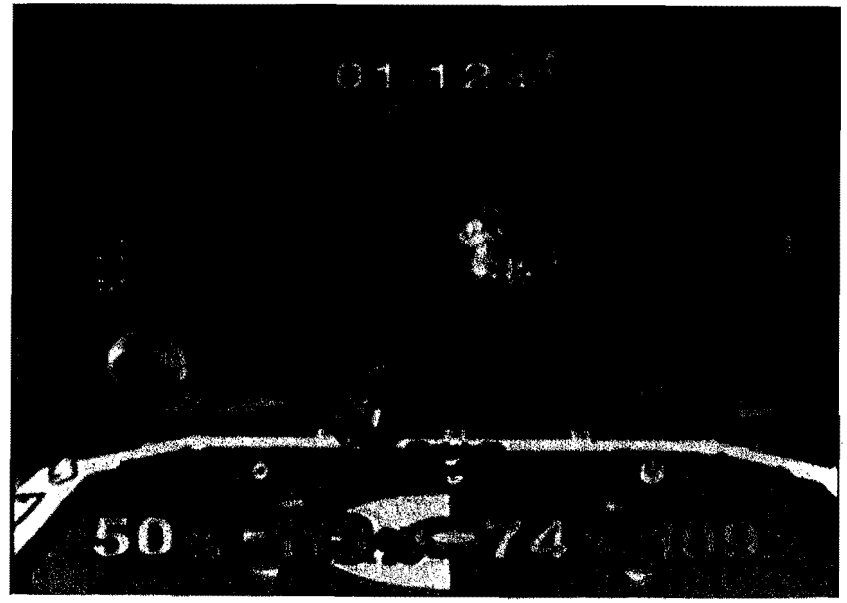


Figure 2.2 Screenshot of *Super Smash Brothers Melee* (Hung 2011).

The scoring problem was solved by direct verbal instruction.[13] The problems posed by the controller (fig. 2.3) were more difficult to address. Here is one instance in which the controller becomes the explicit focus:

LI: *Wait, show me for a second what button you press.*

ANDREW: *Let me see what moves this character had*

KEVIN: *Let me teach you a move. . . . Come over here. I'll teach you one move.*

LI: *How do I use it?*

KEVIN: *I'll teach you a move.*

JASON: *Jump up, and then press this button.*

LI: *Do you have to move this?*

JASON: *Jump up, press the up button, then the "B" button.*

[about a minute passes]

JASON: *This one? Press down.*

LI: *What are you doing?*

JASON: *Andrew, let me, let me, Andrew, let me show her a few moves. Let me show her a few things. . . . Press the down button.* (Hung 2011, 121–23)

In such cases, direct, discursive instruction did not quite work, partially because the instructions had to be deictic and partially because they involved muscle control. In

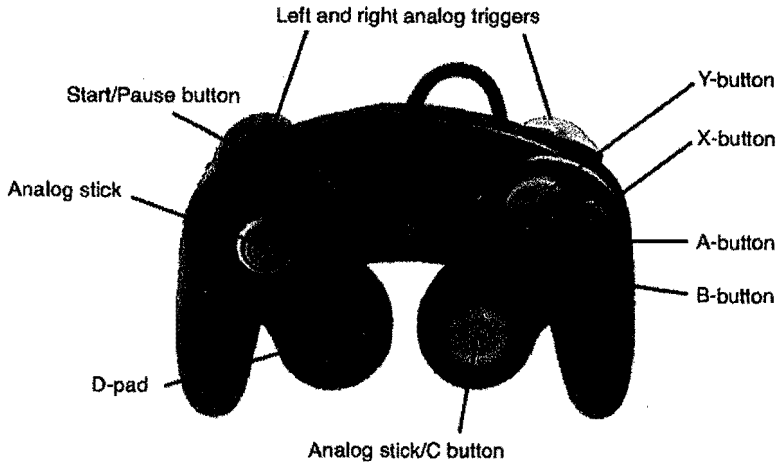


Figure 2.3 Game Controller (*Wikipedia* 2010).

order to fight adequately, one had always to press *this* rather than *that* button—without looking at the controller or one's hands.[14] Given the pace of the game, one did not have time to think about what one was doing, either. And yet there were times when it was impossible not to shift to explicit instruction which revealed the host of problems one has to face when playing such a game. One of the problems was rooted partially in classic conversational difficulties related to the making of indexical propositions and their interpretation. Another problem was a matter of controller design and muscle coordination. This can be said to be a matter of literally "embodying" a cultural arbitrary and to be related to what Marcel Mauss called "techniques of the body" (1979, 114–15). In a world of cyborgs, it can also be said to be a matter of the so-called en-machining of a cultural arbitrary. In any event, habituating one's thumbs to various engineers' design choices is not easy to teach or to do.

Bruno Latour (2005) is famous for stating boldly that things have agency. In our case it would be more technically useful to say that things (controller design, screen display, or programming decisions on the relationship between handling of the controller and changes on the screen) are the mediating interface in an asynchronous interaction between designers and users when neither can assess, and then possibly correct, what the others are doing while they are doing it. A player can try to teach the other player something he discovers she cannot do, but he cannot report his discoveries back to the designers.[15]

This asynchronicity between the actors of far-flung and heavily differentiated polities is of course what makes the task of designers intractable to simple rationalism. The users must imagine what the engineers might have intended, but they will never meet them. The engineers must imagine what users might do, but they cannot meet all of them. As Garfinkel has argued (2002, chapter 6) regarding the writing of instruction manuals, the engineers' task, if it is presented as building universally accessible machines, is impossible in principle; engineers cannot imagine all the possible settings and

participants that might use the machine. Thus machines as things have a similar relationship to future action as any verbal statement. Machines suggest particular possibilities while remaining open to assessments that might transform the machines as statement into literally some *thing* else. A machine, like a muscle spasm, can become twitch or wink, and *that* is what it will be for the duration, and for the polity.

Suchman (2007) has extensively explored the peculiarities of human-machine configurations. For our purposes we emphasize only that the crowd of people who imagine, design an interface, program the whole, and eventually play the games in real time, produce only one thing for future reference: the playing (well or not, and satisfactorily or not) of *this* game rather than any other one. The earlier uncertainties get resolved by a political process that produces not so much a consensus as a practical acknowledgment that future struggles will invoke the playing of *that* game *that* day. The game that was played may not have been the game the designer envisioned. For example, Hung's corpus includes two of the expert players' exploration of alternative games made possible by the design of *Super Smash Brothers Melee* (2011, chapter 6). And, of course, personal relationships may be established or transformed. In the process, new forms of political-arbitrary (in Bourdieu's sense) get produced for all those who will find themselves involved: two boys can now say, "*We* are now playing *this* (alternative to the) game," or a boy and a girl can say, "*We* are now a couple" and make it a reality to all who care about either of them.

In other words, at all stages, history gets made through the assessment that *this* happened for the intents and purposes of people who emerge as a polity to each other because of their engagement with the assessment. Mutual engagement, it must be emphasized again, is not at all equivalent to acceptance of an assessment as the only possible one, or even to a recognition or agreement that one now finds oneself in the same polity. The most reluctant participant may actually be the most aware of the arbitrariness, if not symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) that faced her and within which she was caught.

The Politics of Getting Caught in Complex Polities

The preceding case studies illustrate how new technologies, as they enter everyday life, can reveal classical processes in a new light. Wessler and Hung showed participants in very local politics. They also showed how the peculiar affordances of video games linked the ostensible participants to many others. Determining the boundaries of a polity is not an easy task for either the analyst or the actors.[16] The ethnomethodological tradition has made it plain that analysts should follow the actors for guidance. As Garfinkel put it, "It is the working of the phenomenon that exhibits among its other details the population that staffs it" (2002, 93). The principle is simple, but not easy to use—particularly when the actors are as confused as the analysts as to who is participating and to what effect. The problem was once dramatized in the movie *Taxi Driver,* in which Robert de Niro famously asks, "You talkin' to me? . . . Well, I'm the only one here. Who the f—— do you think you're talking to?" Who, indeed is talking to whom when four youths play a video game? In *Taxi Driver,* the irony lies in the character being shown alone in his room, talking to his image in a mirror. Actually, it would be more ethnographically exact to answer that we see an actor

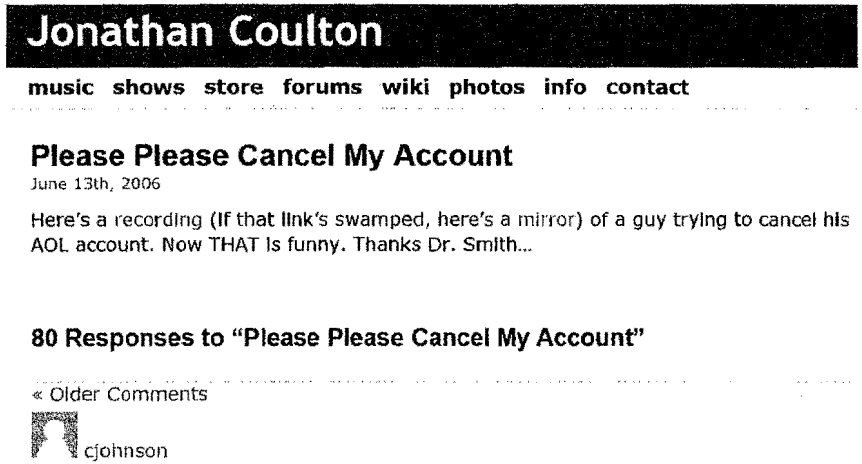
talking to a camera and, thus, to some audience in a movie theater. But even this answer is inadequate in that it does not mention the director, the maker of the camera, or the corporations that fund the film and distribute it.

Our concern now is with the determination of the "here," "who," and "what" when none is self-evident or when it appears that people are alone, writing for invisible audiences that they hope are accessible and might help them accomplish a practical task, or just having fun. In Andrews's setting (2010), blogging, the here would appear readily apparent: it is the web page one has opened. Who would appear to be the owner, identified someplace more or less prominently. What is sometimes specified by formal statements, or by the apparent implicature of opening posts. But all this may not be quite as clear as it seems. The markings of where one has been directed, who is the author of the page, and what it is about can be difficult to assess. Look, for example, at figure 2.4, a screenshot of the blog we treat in this case study:[17]

It is only by clicking on the seventh tab ("info") in the list of words on the second line that we find Jonathan Coulton introducing himself:

> My name is Jonathan Coulton and I'm a musician, a singer-songwriter and an internet superstar. This site is chock full of music, news and me-related merchandise—if you're not that familiar with who I am and what I do you can use the links above to get started. (Coulton 2006)

But many, when first arriving on a page suggested by some search engine, will not then look for an info page. This may be the most proximate reason for the common complaint of expert bloggers that people regularly post responses or comments which appear to imply that they are constructing another what for the blog, or another kind


Jonathan Coulton

music shows store forums wiki photos info contact

Please Please Cancel My Account

June 13th, 2006

Here's a recording (If that link's swamped, here's a mirror) of a guy trying to cancel his AOL account. Now THAT is funny. Thanks Dr. Smith...

80 Responses to "Please Please Cancel My Account"

« Older Comments

cjohnson

November 14, 2007 at 12:43 am

OH GOD HOW DID I GET HERE I AM NOT GOOD WITH THE COMPUTER

Figure 2.4 Screenshot of Jonathan Coulton's blog including the original post and one of the latter comments (#51).

of person than the info page attempts to describe. Whether the posting of such comments is a symptom of ignorance or of design error is a matter of continuing debate among the expert bloggers themselves. Andrews focuses instead on the peculiar affordances of blogging, as well as of the search engines that lead people to a here that is not the one they were trying to reach, and that get them to interact with people with whom they have no interest in interacting.

Of all textual genres, blogging seems closest to essay writing. Like this chapter, a comment on a blog has a specified author or authors and various stylistic means to place the comment within a discursive tradition and its polities. Yet blogging, like essay writing, is concretely performed away from members of these polities in both time and place. Such genres (which also include letter writing and email) are interactionally asynchronous. Synchronicity (in face-to-face or telephone conversations) allows for ongoing assessments (feedback) of the relative efficacy of the stylistic means to establish that the text is actually being heard or read, that it is decipherable, that it does address an earlier statement in a conversation or discursive tradition, or that it does contribute something that other members of the polities might wish to criticize. In face-to-face conversation all this can be done on the fly and in parallel to the statement. At the other extreme, in book publishing, for example, assessments might come weeks, months, or years after publication (when the text is made public). Book authors may never learn what these assessments are, including what else might have been done with their text that they could not have imagined and that might have dismayed them.

It is on this last matter that blogging is interestingly different from other forms of text-making. Readers of blogs are encouraged by the software and the authors to comment and to have these comments made public. Consider this statement that appeared on Jonathan Coulton's blog. The entry that started the thread is titled "Please Please Cancel My Account" and is dated June 13, 2006:

> Here's a recording (if that link's swamped, here's a mirror) of a guy trying to cancel his AOL account. Now THAT is funny. Thanks Dr. Smith . . .

Among the next statements some suggest familiarity with the contexts indexed in the post ("if *that* link's swamped . . ."):

> Glenn
>
> June 13, 2006 at 3:24 pm
>
> Tried the mirror first, got bandwidth exceeded. Sigh. First link seems to work, although slow.
>
> [Comment #2]

Other comments expand on the first post in the same spirit:

> Carol
>
> June 14, 2006 at 4:44 pm
>
> I attempted twice to cancel AOL on speakerphone at work, just so my coworkers could laugh at their ridiculous antics with me. It was fun and annoying at the same time.
>
> [Comment #5]

Then the stream went quiet, but after a few months other comments appeared. They were of a different kind:

> Zach
>
> October 17, 2006 at 12:58 am
>
> i wnt my aol account cancelled completely
>
> [Comment #15]

Zach repeated his request six minutes later. This was followed within the hour by

> Diana
>
> November 7, 2006 at 1:26 am
>
> I need to put my account on hold. I am moving but not into my new address until mid December. What do I do?
>
> [Comment #15]

Fourteen other people made similar requests over the months that followed. In other words some, and eventually quite a lot of, people appeared to believe that they could cancel their AOL account by posting a request to Coulton's blog. Coulton himself eventually assessed these requests as being wrong:

> Jonathan Coulton » Blog Archive » Funny Google Thing
>
> May 11, 2007 at 5:55 am
>
> . . . I have been watching with some amusement the growing number of comments at this old post of mine (about the recording of that guy trying to cancel his AOL account) from people who are actually trying to cancel some kind of account. I guess I can see how you could make that mistake if you were really not an internet person, but I really couldn't figure out how everyone was finding their way to that post. But this morning I googled "cancel my account" and guess what's the number one result? Thanks Google. . . .
>
> [Comment #32]

This last comment is written as if addressed to a generalized audience. It could be either "you who are really an internet person" or, ironically, "Google" (although Coulton, as an "internet person," would know that Google does not attend to such comments). This particular comment did not stop the stream of requests, but it did start a new stream affirming, developing, and playing with the making of these requests. For example, the next comment, made two hours after Coulton's, reads thus:

> Brett
>
> May 11, 2007 at 7:35 am
>
> Hey JC, looks like you might have the making of a new internet business on your hands here. Global Account Cancellation Services. So when you're not busy writing new songs and performing all over the country, you can hang around on the phone cancelling accounts for other people.
>
> [Comment #33]

The last comment in the thread dates from July 2010—three years later—when Domingo requests, "please cancel my playboy account thanks [Comment #80]."[18]

The eighty comments as read in summer 2011 make quite an interesting (postmodern?) text. It looks like a transcript of a strange conversation. But it is of course not a single conversation but a partial record of multiple conversations that interfere with each other. We have evidence of the way Coulton and his ostensible polity noticed the interference and played with it. We have little evidence of the conversations that led Zach, Diana, and Domingo to post their requests on Coulton's blog. We have no direct evidence of their assessment of the (lack of) response by Coulton, or whoever they imagined they were addressing. We do have some textual evidence that request comments were part of complex sequences. For example, these three statements were posted within three minutes of each other (with no other comment interfering) on the same day:[19]

> dr.smith
>
> December 1, 2007 at 11:17 am
>
> sorry but i am really really a girl i am 14 years old it was a mistake that i signed male instead of female please delete my hi5 account.my name is raniquw deadra carroll. it will be very helpfull if you delete my account off hi5.thank you very much.sir/madam.
>
> [Comment #53]

> ranique
>
> December 1, 2007 at 11:18 am
>
> my name is ranique
>
> [Comment #54]

> ranique
>
> December 1, 2007 at 11:20 am
>
> sorry about puttin your name there.
>
> [Comment #55]

That it was wrong to post these comments on *this* blog is not exactly a problem for the writers—except to the extent that it will not achieve what they wish to accomplish. We have evidence that some felt that something was wrong. As one commenter shouted:

> cjohnson
>
> November 14, 2007 at 12:43 am
>
> OH GOD HOW DID I GET HERE I AM NOT GOOD WITH THE COMPUTER
>
> [Comment # 51]

In another paper on this and other such threads, Andrews and Varenne (2011) pointed that such practical mistakes, when they are sequenced within an overall search, can also be seen as evidence for everyday ongoing education about one's actual world. Here we want only to emphasize the vagueness of the markers that indicate to which polity a blog belongs, the complicity of search engines amplifying this vagueness, and the vagaries of the actual design of the visual interfaces provided by the blogging software. As is true of video games, the crowd of engineers and programmers that produce all this—whether or not they are aware of the difficulties they are making for expert users as well as newbies—are themselves limited by their own position and the affordances of their materials.[20] And yet, in this complex network, in Latour's sense, *this* is "it" for some purpose: a place to laugh at AOL making it difficult to cancel an account, a place to cancel the account, or a place where one is judged to be ignorant—but perhaps without serious consequences.

In, Temporary, Conclusion

The attention we gave to people trying to cancel their AOL account may seem to have taken us far from our starting point—playing with the other traditions in which the term "assessment" has currency. Assessments of being "wrong," or "in error," or "ignorant" in the worlds of video gaming or blogging may be embarrassing, but they generally do not threaten one's career. This is quite different from what can happen at the end of a testing sequence for certain high-stakes assessments. In those cases one's life can radically change in the course of the behavioral event; although making a pencil mark on a piece of paper may not be much different from pushing a button on a controller, or posting a brief request on a blog, or twitching. But we are concerned with tracing the differences in the consequentialities of assessments produced by complex polities for political purposes. Assessments do not constitute simply what is happening in the present. They also produce a new future in terms of the polities that make this or that event and its assessment politically consequential—and to what extent. The original act, be it a twitch of the muscles around the eyes, a squeeze of the fingers, or a mark on a test, may be long over when the assessment is made—and the consequences may be even farther reaching.

Many have looked retrospectively at historical conditions and noted that the meting of such consequences does happen and it can be unfair and hurtful. But we are not interested in retrospective explanation or archeologies of the past. Our call is for a recentering of social analyses from a concern with deconstruction to a concern with the ongoing production of emergent futures. Tracing the history of any assessment can be interesting, but that alone is not sufficient. Geertz led the way when he talked about thick descriptions but gave little guidance on how to do this, and his conclusion about the usefulness of such descriptions introduced what became his pessimism about anthropology. "The vocation of anthropology" cannot, in his words, simply be "making available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said" (1973, 30). It has to be the identification of what is involved in the giving of answers.

More precisely, the vocation of anthropology, we dare say, is carefully investigating temporal sequences to figure out what happens between the earlier and later parts of the sequence as they concern the placement of the participants and what they will be known for having done. In schools, doctors' offices, and psychological clinics, we know that ultimately winks are winks and twitches are twitches whose intents and purposes can have long-lasting consequences. When a polity plays deeply (to expand on Geertz), the rewards can be great, but the risks are just as great. High-stakes assessments thus cannot fail to become the focus of political activity, and not only at the national level. At the most local of levels, where anthropologists are best at the work of discovery, the politics are just as intense—yet they operate in ways that cannot quite be imagined. As an assessment approaches, and then recedes, a polity gets established; in the world of schooling, for example, parents, children, teachers, and administrators find themselves struggling with inescapable regulations and tools created by people far away. Their world is not quite a stage; and they play what is, after all, not a game. And yet, as Shakespeare intuited, examining stages and games can illuminate when people are assessed and some are found to be experts, whereas others are told they cannot play anymore.

We are starting to get research reports that give us a sense of what can be gained by pursuing this route (Eyal et al. 2010; Koyama 2010). We need more.

:-)

Epilogue

In September 1982, people at the Carnegie Mellon School of Computer Science found themselves faced with a problem of their own making when some of them sent a message about a fire in the elevator. The authors wrote it as a joke. Some of the recipients took it literally. Scott Fahlman suggested a solution that made history:

> 19-Sep-82 11:44 Scott E Fahlman :-)
>
> From: Scott E Fahlman <Fahlman at Cmu-20c>
>
> I propose that [*sic*] the following character sequence for joke markers:
>
> :-)
>
> Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use
>
> :-(
>
> (Fahlman 1982)

This was posted as a comment on a thread after a joking comment had been interpreted as a threat. This was a problem that had to be resolved given the affordances of early versions of software that would become current blogging software. Then, as always, one had to be able to distinguish between messages to be taken at face value and messages to be taken as joking commentary that might have been accompanied with a wink had the statement been made face to face. For there are times when winks *must* be taken as just that. Either there is a fire in the elevator or there is not. On the

anniversary of Fahlman's history-making suggestion, commentator Garrison Keillor summarized the thread as follows:

> The following day, after the rumor had finally been put to rest, someone wrote, "Maybe we should adopt a convention of putting a star (*) in the subject field of any notice that is to be taken as a joke." It is, of course, impossible to know whether the writer intended this post as a legitimate course of action or as a joke. Regardless, numerous people chimed in with various suggestions, the earnestness of which was, again, difficult to determine. Was the poster who recommended using the percent sign instead of the asterisk sincere? Possibly. The one who proclaimed that the ampersand looks "like a jolly fat man in convulsions of laughter"? Probably not. The one who developed a complete taxonomy and scale of joke types and values, complete with a coding schema? These were computer scientists, after all. (Keillor 2011)

We should certainly celebrate the power of social processes to give us occasions to laugh.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. This chapter is part of a sequence of essays on education and the politics of productive ignorance (Varenne 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009, 2011).
2. Note that this is true of any technology that is new to a population. See research on the introduction of snowmobiles and GPS navigation among the Inuit (Aporta and Higgs 2005; Pelto 1973).
3. Foucault, of course, developed this much further into a political critique of our dominant polities as the classify to discipline and punish (1970, 1979).
4. We will not discuss the complex debate between structuralists and symbolists on the matter of the relationship of classifications to meaning or the mind. Our work suggests that this debate was off target and confused the fundamental issues.
5. This description is commonly used in the industry. How the underlying classificatory scheme has been produced is a matter for historical investigation and is a matter of ongoing discussion (Juul 2005; Newman and Oram 2006).
6. They could do that from their own terminals elsewhere in the room.
7. As we did elsewhere (Varenne and McDermott 1998), we capitalize School and Teacher when indexing institutions and roles rather than particular schools or individual teachers.
8. Others, inspired by Rancière (1999), might see here the glory of the ignorant schoolmaster letting their pupils discover for themselves what they are interested in learning, including who can best help them (and who cannot).
9. The situation is comparable but radically different from the moments when a teacher, following the kind of assessment current school reformers advocate, is to be fired for not being able to improve student scores.
10. All participants could handle either language well enough for strictly game-related moves. The boys did a lot of code switching, but mostly about metacommunicational matters. Sometimes they made fun of Li's speech, or shifted into Cantonese when they discussed her moves or planned further play.
11. The quotations included in this chapter are a summary of the published analysis. There the transcript is done according to the usual conversational analysis (CA) strictures and includes the original Cantonese or Mandarin.

12. One of the players considered briefly whether to make up an alternate version of the game in which the point would be to increase the number: How high would it go? What would have to be done in order to increase it? Two of the boys later played yet another alternate version of the game.
13. In this game, the problem is actually quite complex since none of the numbers are scores in the naïve sense. They are stated as percentages and are supposed to give the player information about his state and his progress towards death. This ambiguity was actually built into this particular game by its designers.
14. Adding to the confusion is the fact that half the buttons on the controller do nothing and must be actively ignored.
15. Various message boards provide forums in which users vent their frustrations. Whether these comments affect designers, or how designers filter these comments, is something that remains to be investigated.
16. The classic text should be Robert Redfield's altogether forgotten *The Little Community* (1960), which summarized a quarter century of work struggling with the issues surrounding whether and how a community is a community, to whom, and for what purposes. As the currency of the word "community" has been reconstituted in such phrases as "communities of practice" or "participatory structures," the issues remain.
17. All statements are from a stream of eighty comments to the initial one (Coulton 2006). Note that we are treating Jonathan Coulton as a published author, not as an informant.
18. We do not have evidence that this was indeed the last comment, since Coulton may have decided to delete further comments.
19. The name above the time stamp on the comments should, in the blog designer's view, be the name of the comment writer. The blog designer expects the commenter to see the field labeled "name" on the comment submission form and enter his or her own name. The blog software then posts this data to indicate authorship of the comment. It appears that this writer constructed this box as a place for the name of the addressee, which she took to be "dr.smith"—the only person named in the original post (see fig. 2.4). Within a minute the writer noticed the error and, two minutes later, apologized for what was actually the wrong error.
20. Newbies, in netspeak, are referred to as "n00bs."

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