

Social Interaction Design Notes (SxD)

Reading Notes

Games People Play by Eric Berne

First draft

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Adrian@gravity7.com
<http://www.gravity7.com>

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Summary

It is likely that much of the social activity and interaction we now see online, in online gaming, in online communities, at social software sites like MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, as well as over email... it seems more than likely in fact, that this activity, though it occurs without our being face-to-face and co-present to those with whom we are "interacting," bears more than a resemblance in form and appearance, in proceeding and structure, to the pursuit if not satisfaction of the deep emotional and affective motivations behind transactions among communicating individuals in real, face-to-face situations. It would be unlikely for online interactions to involve some entirely foreign or novel form of interaction. Not only would novel modes of interaction be subject to high rates of failure due to the inadequate familiarity or competence demonstrated by participants; the likely existence of a deep emotional and affective motivation would have to find new modes of expression and realization. Given that meaningful exchanges between individuals involve the assessment and evaluation of self-aware and self-reflexive participants, new modes of interaction not related to existing face to face practices, as variations on themes or as extensions of existing practices, would be unable to provide a cushioning framework to which interactants might refer in the case that uncertainty, ambiguity in communication requires corrective or normative explication or grounding. In other words, it's much more likely that online interactions bear a direct resemblance to our everyday interactions, for the simple reason that communication builds on itself, that communication is a process and proceeding, a performance and activity in which mutually engaged participants differentiate their own individual communications only by their use of a familiar communication practice. Nothing new can be said unless it is said within a familiar context.

But given the medium's bracketing of our use of face, of expression and body language, of the voice, of tonality and inflection, of the eyes, the look, and its return — given all these things now missing from mediated interactions, how is it possible that communication can even occur online (or through other asynchronous communication technologies)? There would seem to be only a handful of explanations for online communication:

- That in online interaction we bracket our need for affective and emotional acknowledgment and recognition, that in other words we communicate thinly online, and have reduced expectations for the communication that will return to us
- That in fact emotive and affective "contents" of communication are involved and in play in online communications and interactions, and that in fact many of the ambiguities of intent, the uncertainties of proceeding ("How's this going? How am I doing?") motivate the continuation and explication of

communication. In short, that what the medium brackets, we have to deal with, and that we deal with it by communicating *even more* until ambiguities are arrested by the provision of explicit declarations of motive, intent, sincerity, identity, etc.; or that interactants scale down their hopes, needs, interests, or in fact give up, allow communication to fade out, and atrophy.

- Or that, even worse, online communication can be described as a very poor of the real thing indeed, that it is a mode of individual expression that struggles, sometimes with great vanity, narcissism, projection, and fantasy, to grasp at the presence of others online, reading their relationship to us as if through a glass darkly, or through ciphers, sign, tracings, hints, clues, none of which are in fact *for us* because they are in fact the muted presencings of the other and the means by which he or she is engaged in the same emotional fishing expedition...

Eric Berne's *Games People Play*, popular during its time but no less fascinating and perhaps even *relevant to a theory of mediated interaction*, is a wonderful reading of the transactions of emotional "strokes" among people interacting with one another. For Berne, human interaction is always engaged in this fundamental exchange (his theory is exchangist, I think), one that seems to have an effect on the body and on personal well-being as well as having its obvious effect on emotional and psychological dispositions. Though we would have to conjecture as to how human interaction can even communicate with biological systems, I see no reason to so here: it's pretty obvious that we are capable of making each other feel good, as we're capable of truly stressing each other out also. That our moods affect our health is well, just as obvious.

What then of the interactions that occur when we're not face to face? What of Berne's stroke? Let's, for the challenge of it, take this fuzzy but genuine insight, this notion that we communicate in order to provision ourselves and others with a feeling of membership and well-being that has no content itself but is instead the subtext of all content of communication, and map its transposition into mediated social interaction.

Reading My Reading Notes

These reading notes are an exercise in thinking through arguments and ideas I find interesting. As they say before the commencement of a DVD title, "the following opinions do not represent..."

I often don't know if I agree with the authors and ideas I take up in my reading notes. In fact I'm often more uncertain after writing these notes than I was before writing them. They are written quickly and on the fly, and I edit them as little as I can. These reading notes are engagements, conceptual meals conjured from a basket of sacrificial ingredients offered by their authors to the god of food-for-thought. And with that in mind, bon appetit and enjoy the meal.

Keywords

TA, Transactional analysis, Eric Berne, Claude Steiner, I'm OK You're Ok, psychoanalysis, interpersonal psychology, psychodynamics, group analysis, media theory, social software, social media, social interaction design, sxd, ui, interaction design, online, web 2.0, web 3.0, social interface, Adrian Chan, communication theory, social systems, systems theory, internet culture, cmc, online community

Introduction

I'm avoiding, for now, the fantastic stuff that comprises the bulk of Berne's *Games People Play*: the thesaurus of games, pastimes, rituals and other activities in which he maps out a variety of transactional forms and types. I am also skipping Berne's theory of ego states, and his observation of crossed transactions. The reasons for this are somewhat complicated. On the matter of ego states, I have problems with the idea of a state. An ego state, as Eric Berne defines it, seems to capture the child's response to his/her parent's communications/interactions during childhood. Children internalize their parents, the parent (as in Freud) being the locus of normative and authoritative constraints; the ego state *child* being one's childhood response to the parent's structuring claims on the child. The mechanics here seem too simplistic. We have only internalization and rejection. It seems to me that the mind (and the heart, so to speak), in concert with and motivated by affective movements, is capable of a much more differentiated repertoire of action than acceptance and rejection. Not to mention the fact that a view of identity as a structured emotional *response* to contingencies, having little structure of its own interests and desires, would be to suggest that each of us is a little identity handed down to us by the problems that took shape in our parents. Depressing indeed!

I also have some doubt about how Berne gets from the subject's own Parent-Adult-Child ego states to the scripts that Berne sees at work in society, and acted out by each of us. Either we all recognize the parent and child issues manifest in each other and brought to the surface during crossed transactions, and so we relate to scripts on the basis of truth and emotional recognition, or scripts are a structuring of emotional life that serves the purpose of keeping society safe from its individuals. If we recognize the emotional pain that reaches through a recognizable transaction, why do we not attend to the other's pain? Would Berne argue that we are blinded by the emotions the transactional misfire has aroused

in us? That when an emotionally charged interaction loses itself from the decks, we man our own guns even when our opponents are none other than our own cabin crew? That we would rather take the ship down and spoil the fun for all than turn it around?

To Berne, the exchange of emotional recognition in the form of strokes grounds all interpersonal interaction. Clearly, though, our modes of expression, and tools of interpretation, change over time, and with changes to cultural contexts. I have no argument with the idea that we pay each other a fundamental and essential human need, that is, attention, when we interact. However, I question our ability to read that affective transaction from linguistic scripts. And I question the wisdom of anchoring affective tension, complements, within an exchange-based system that takes linguistic form. There would be no need for language at all if the base transaction is affect: gesture would suffice. In its linguistic form, meaning acquires nuances that create possibilities for response and interpretation that far exceed the non-subtle and non zero-sum math of the stroke as I understand it here.

One more thing on the stroke. It seems to Berne that the stroke is a type of message, a kind of content whose value is positive, and whose exchange is affirming. Yet Berne treats it as an object of exchange. The giver, for example, does not also benefit from giving another a stroke. Berne gives a examples of situations in which people are given many strokes—it would seem too many—from a passing neighbor. Berne doesn't seem to permit the possibility that a person might doubt the sincerity of the stroking giver, and the sincerity of their strokes (which in their abundance would seem cheap, even patronizing and manipulative).

And yet I'm going to use the concept for now, because, like Berne, I'm not sure how else to refer to the whole thing. And whether or not a record of emotional and affective engagement in social interaction and inter-personal communication should take shape as exchange economy, as expression, as coordination of action, as reproduction of social norms, or as deep and spiritual binding, *there is a There there*. We do participate emotionally, and even if it's but an illusion and an auto-generated experience by which we project a world of our own interest and meaning into a phenomenon that as intimate as it can get is still but *two separate individuals talking*, this still provides a handle onto the misconnections and misunderstandings that permeate so much of mediated interactions. And to those of you in the business of connecting people online, a stubborn, a wounded, or a genuinely affectionate user is still a user checking his inbox.

Excerpts and Reading Notes

Quotes: Eric Berne

Quotes from *Games People Play*

"By an extension of meaning, 'stroking' may be employed colloquially to denote any act implying recognition of another's presence. Hence a *stroke* may be used as the fundamental unit of social action. An exchange of strokes constitutes a *transaction*, which is the unit of social intercourse." 15, *Games People Play*

"...after stimulus-hunger and recognition-hunger comes *structure-hunger*." 16, *Games People Play*

"The operational aspect of time-structuring may be called programming. It has three aspects: material, social and individual." 16, *Games People Play*

"*Social programming* results in traditional ritualistic or semi-ritualistic interchanges. The chief criterion for it is local acceptability, popularly called good manners. Parents in all parts of the world teach their children manners, which means that they know the proper greeting, eating emunctory, courting and mourning rituals, and also how to carry on topical conversations with appropriate strictures and reinforcements. The strictures and reinforcements constitute tact or diplomacy, some of which is universal and some local." 17, *Games People Play*

"Usually formal rituals precede semi-ritualistic topical conversations, and the latter may be distinguished by calling them *pastimes*." 17, *Games People Play*

"As people become better acquainted, more and more *individual programming* creeps in, so that 'incidents' begin to occur. These incidents superficially appear to be adventitious, and may be so described by the parties concerned, but careful scrutiny reveals that they tend to follow definite patterns which are amenable to sorting and classification, and that the sequence is circumscribed by unspoken rules and regulations. These regulations remain latent as long as the amities or hostilities proceed according to Hoyle, but they become manifest if an illegal move is made, giving rise to a symbolic, verbal or legal cry of "Foul!" Such sequences, which in contrast to pastimes are based more on individual than on social programming, may be called *games*. Family life and married life, as well as life in organizations of various kinds, may year after year be based on variations of the same game." 17, *Games People Play*

"To say that the bulk of social activity consists of playing games does not necessarily mean that it is mostly 'fun' or that the parties are not seriously engaged in the relationship.... The essential characteristic of human play is not that the emotions are spurious, but that they are regulated." 18, *Games People Play*

"Pastimes and games are substitutes for the real living of real intimacy. Because of this they may be regarded as preliminary engagements rather than as unions, which is why they are characterized as poignant forms of play. Intimacy begins when individual (usually instinctual) programming becomes more intense, and both social patterning and ulterior restrictions and motives begin to give way." 18, *Games People Play*

"Structure-hunger has the same survival value as stimular-hunger. Stimulus-hunger and recognition-hunger express the need to avoid sensory and emotional starvation, both of which lead to biological deterioration. Structure-hunger expresses the need to avoid boredom, and Kierkegaard has pointed out the evils which result from unstructured time. If it persists for any length of time, boredom becomes synonymous with emotional starvation and can have the same consequences." 18, *Games People Play*

"The solitary individual can structure time in two ways: activity and fantasy. When one is a member of a social aggregation of two or more people, there are several options for structuring time. In order of complexity, these are: (1) Rituals (2) Pastimes (3) Games (4) Intimacy and (5) Activity, which may form a matrix for any of the others. The goal of each member of the aggregation is to obtain as many satisfactions as possible from his transactions with other members. The more accessible he is, the more 'satisfactions' he can obtain." 19, *Games People Play*

"The advantages of social contact revolve around somatic and psychic equilibrium. They are related to the following factors: (1) the relief of tension (2) the avoidance of noxious situations (3) the procurement of stroking and (4) the maintenance of an established equilibrium." 19, *Games People Play*

"Experience has shown that it is more useful and enlightening to investigate social transactions from the point of view of the advantages gained than to treat them as defensive operations." 19, *Games People Play*

"The most gratifying forms of social contact, whether or not they are embedded in a matrix of activity, are games and intimacy. Prolonged intimacy is rare, and even then it is primarily a private matter; significant social intercourse most commonly takes the form of games, and that is the subject which principally concerns us here." 19-20, *Games People Play*

"More complex are *ulterior transactions* — those involving the activity of more than two ego states simultaneously — and this category is the basis for games. Salesmen are particularly adept at *angular transactions*, those involving three ego states. A crude but dramatic example of a sales game is illustrated in the following exchange:

Salesman: "This one is better, but you can't afford it"

Housewife: "That's the one I'll take"

The analysis of this transaction is shown in Figure 5A. The salesman, as Adult, states two objective facts: "This one is better" and "You can't afford it." At the ostensible, or *social, level* these are directed to the Adult of the housewife, whose Adult reply would be: "You are correct on both counts." However, the *ulterior, or psychological,* vector is directed by the well-trained and experienced Adult of the salesman to the housewife's Child. The correctness of his judgment is demonstrated by the Child's reply, which says in effect: "Regardless of the financial consequences, I'll show that arrogant fellow I'm as good as any of his customers." At both levels the transaction is complementary, since her reply is accepted at face value as an Adult purchasing contract. 33, *Games People Play*

"Transactions usually proceed in series. These series are not random, but are programmed. Programming may come from one of three sources: Parent, Adult or Child, or more generally, from society, material or idiosyncrasy." 35, *Games People Play*

The simplest forms of social activity are procedures and rituals. Some of these are universal and some local, but all of them have to be learned. A *procedure* is a series of simple complementary Adult transactions directed toward the manipulation of reality." 35, *Games People Play*

"From the present viewpoint, a *ritual* is a stereotyped series of simple complementary transactions programmed by external social forces. An informal ritual, such as social leave-taking, may be subject to considerable local variation in details, although the basic form remains the same." 36, *Games People Play*

"A game is an ongoing series of complementary *ulterior transactions* progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome. Descriptively it is a recurring set of transactions, often repetitious, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation; or, more colloquially, a series of moves with a snare, or "gimmick" Games are clearly differentiated from procedures, rituals, and past times by two chief characteristics (1) their *ulterior quality* and (2) the payoff." 48, *Games People Play*

“Because there is so little opportunity for intimacy in daily life, and because some forms of intimacy (especially if intense) are psychologically impossible for most people, the bulk of the time in serious social life is taken up with playing games. Hence games are both necessary and desirable, and the only problem at issue is whether the games played by an individual offer the best yield for him.” 61, *Games People Play*

“Society frowns upon candidness, except in privacy; good sense knows that it can always be abused; and the Child fears it because of the unmasking which it involves. Hence in order to get away from the ennui of pastimes without exposing themselves to the dangers of intimacy, most people compromise for games when they are available.” 172, *Games People Play*

Reading Notes on Games People Play

Different Strokes

- Interactions are transactions
- What is transacted is not its visible content
- In fact it is a kind of acknowledgment, or type of meaning, that exceeds the capabilities of linguistic interaction
- It is what cannot be put into words, but which rides upon, or provides the foundation on which words take flight
- Unique to the stroke is the fact that it may contradict the utterance that provides it
- And this is because the stroke is a “unit” of attention
- And insofar as attention is provided when a speaker addresses him or herself to another person in a social exchange or encounter, it matters less what s/he says than that s/he says something at all

Is that stroke for me?

- Assuming some truth to Berne’s project...
- This unit is not transmitted in asynchronous and mediated communication in the way that it is in face to face transactions
- And yet an indication of the intent is visible
- Not only that, but the stroke may be read into communication not addressed to the listener/reader
- In fact the intent of the speaker may have been simply to post something, to write an opinion, to comment on a post, to contest, argue, undermine, contradict, agree with an existing “statement”
- But if the author’s statement is attached to an existing statement (text, blog post, video)
- the recipient of that post may feel recognized and acknowledged
- In other words a stroke may be deduced, or conjured out of thin air
- Paradoxically, and this has been clear to psychologists for a long time, the thinner an interaction, the more may be attributed to it
- In Luhmannian terms, this creates possibilities for communication
- As it opens the interpretive space for readers/listeners/viewers
- Communication by authors-writers/posters/users remains on the page, so to speak, and unless it has been claimed by another user, its psychological stroke value persists (for the consumption by readers/viewers)
- In online discussions, users do not lay claim to the stroke if another has already done so

- In fact, if a user mistakenly responds to the stroke of a post online, and is called out on it, s/he will feel embarrassed for having taken attention and acknowledgment that wasn't due (him/her)
- In other words, an economy of strokes does subsist in communication online. It is an unwritten (strokes cannot be stated explicitly) economy. It exists when communication online is addressed ambiguously.
- Emails do not participate in this stroke economy. Emails are sent to an addressee, and are not posted to a public communication space
- However, confusion of stroke exchanges can occur when emails are forwarded
- in which case the recipient may rightly or wrongly assume that the individual forwarding the email offers a stroke of recognition
- which is diminished if the email has been addressed to a group
- and/or that the sender of the original email offers a stroke of recognition
 - mistakenly (e.g. the recipient thinks the email is for her, when it wasn't, because it was meant for the person the email was first sent to)
 - or by proxy (the sender of the original email suspected the email might be sent along, and so was in fact thinking of him/her)

Strokes, and the Attention Economy

- All of which is to say that in this kind economy the stroke set in enough ambiguity of intent (the speaker's/author's/poster's intent) to make obtaining strokes an act as uncertain as that of addressing them to others
- We could insist that giving and getting strokes is really only possible in situations of face to face interaction, but even if there were true, there is no denying that much user activity online seems addressed to getting attention
- Now we could of course add here that users seek to get attention online precisely because attention is
 - Scarce online, or rather, that the medium itself doesn't provide any attention
 - Because, as a user-centric activity, being online means paying attention to the medium, not the other way around
 - And yet there are clearly many signs that users get online to get attention, among them:
 - Attempts to stand out in social software sites
 - Posts and comments intended (it would seem) to get the attention of visitors
 - An online advertising regime designed to get the attention of users
 - And the fundamental fact that nothing exists online unless or until attention is paid to it, thus conditions set up for the giving and getting of attention

- Sites that are popular are paid attention to
- Sites that have limited user activity are not paid attention to, or are paid attention to for the fact that users are not paying attention to them
- Attention is measured as activity by users
- And so is taken as an indication of user
 - Interest
 - Approval
 - And sometimes
 - Commitment
 - Loyalty
- Clicks are the means by which attention is measured online

You talking to me? You looking at me?

- We know what is being said by
 - What is said
 - And to whom it is said
- Both of which, the utterance, and its utterer
 - Help us determine (or guess at) *why it is uttered*
- Which is significant if we are to know
 - What to do with it (how to respond)

Hold that stroke

- Given clarity about what has been said and to whom
- And a sense (our own sense – it's not guaranteed yet by the speaker) of what s/he intended to say
- It's possible for us to proceed with a response
- And thus to open or continue a proceeding
- Note that we don't have to be correct in our interpretation of what has been said
 - Rather, we need only have a response about which
 - We know what we are responding with (what we're saying)
 - To the person to whom we are responding
 - Having established a sense of what is going on
 - And thus having integrated or taken his/her interpretation of our actions into account
- And proceeding in this manner, speaker and listener, taking turns
- Engage in a run of talk in which things are said and other things are left unsaid, the unsaid things being
 - Understood to each speaker to some conscious degree
 - But not revealed to the other insofar as those things are spoken

- And so we see that the *pragmatics* of face to face interaction/communication involves an exchange of non-linguistic meanings whose meanings are known, completely, neither to the speaker nor the listener
- But which are instead coordinated through the interaction's proceeding
- Meaning in other words, that linguistic interactions are not only about the exchange of spoken, uttered meanings (semantic content) but are a mutually-reinforcing and collaborative (even when rivalrous, contentious, hostile) interaction and coordination of individual action/speech
- That interaction, in its non-linguistic operation, creates meaning for its participants best described in terms of
 - Interaction handling as an activity comprised of moves and with infinite possibilities and openings for individual moves
 - Handling and regulation of one's face and facial gestures
 - A shared or mutual (unspoken, tacit) commitment to protect and if necessary save the face of those involved
 - Embarrassment of one is embarrassing to all
 - And it seems that we do not enjoy wrecking an interaction
 - In fact the degree to which we preserve and sustain "harmony" in interactions is fascinating for the depth and degree of richness the undertakings offer us
 - And it is, in all likelihood, precisely this, in the spontaneity and productive creation of a sense of activity, action, exchange of attention and enjoyment of being in the company of others, that motivates us to handle and care take our interactions with others
 - For which we have of course developed intricate "codes," "rules of behavior," games, all of which govern our expectations, etc of who things are going, should go, and will go....
 - To the extent that it's been noted that even "at the gallows," the man facing his own execution will behave politely towards his executioner

Residual attention

- Assuming that we our actions online are obtained from interactions in real life, these hypotheses offer themselves:
 - We approach online interactions with a model of interaction obtained from the real world
 - We initiate communication as we would in real life
 - We follow through as we would in real life
 - We respond as we would in real life

Strokes beget strokes

- There is an asymmetry in the interactions and participation that occur online. Adding to content on the web is a simple matter when compared to obtaining feedback
 - For this reason it makes sense to be as nice, as welcoming, as funny, as like-able as possible
 - So that others are more likely to respond
 - And this is particularly true in a new encounter/group
 - Before it is safe to use wit/blades
- If it is unclear what a person intends when s/he responds to a communication, we are better off if we are kind and if we look on the positive side of possible meanings
- (assuming that ongoing communication is what we're after)

Invisible strokes

- Strokes pass amongst members of online communities, and between communicands (users of communication tools) out of sight. Not all strokes are given visibly, that is, passed in the form of interactions that are captured online and thus seen by others
- Approval can be won by the audience (a group, or an online community, for example) by a member who
 - Takes on a challenger in debate
 - Battles another and thus wins respect
 - Earns respect or approval by his/her performance
 - Appears well
 - Sexy
 - Attractive
 - Desireable
 - Rich
 - Famous
 - Happy
 - And so on
 - It would be understood tacitly that a person has earned recognition by members of a group
 - And possibly then become a topic of passing discussion and talk (as in a look or glance of recognition)

A measure of strokes

- Strokes not given explicitly may be measured nonetheless:
 - Views of a member profile page or
 - Hits or

- Ratings
- Or a ranking
- Each suggest that attention is being paid
- Though in a form that does not “pay” attention to the user to whom attention is being paid
- The form of attention paid here, rather, is interest as can be captured through clickthrough-tracking software
- Measures of attention paid can feed themselves, as curiosity captures attention from those intrigued to discover what is going on
- But all of this can happen behind a person’s back
- And so for this reason, we can’t assume a direct correlation between
 - Interest/strokes and
 - Feelings felt by the person to whom all of this attention is being paid

Stroke me!

- Self presentation (in online profiles, for example), creates the challenge of walking a fine line between:
 - Not saying enough, and enough interesting things in particular, to attract attention and interest
 - Saying too much, and making one’s motives so transparent that others feel uncertain about responding to, commenting on, adding to, or otherwise contributing publicly to one’s presence online
 - For the reason that if it is obvious to us that a member desperately seeks attention, we don’t want to be as easily won that we give it unless
 - We can indicate that we are aware of this interaction dynamic and in fact generous and big enough that the attention we give we give freely, not because it has been drawn out of us
 - Or because we, too, are desperate
- The solicitation of strokes is nonetheless a fundamental preoccupation online:
 - The stroke is indication that our participation is right (appropriate, competent)
 - And approved of
 - And it is also an indication that we are approved of
 - And thus further communication can proceed
 - For the absence of strokes would suggest to a user
 - That it’s not worth it to continue posting to a site
 - Or that his/her methods are mistaken or actions misguided or audience members (individuals, group, or the public) poorly chosen or addressed
- And so on

Preemptive Strokes

- Winking to other members in order to get a wink back
- Writing testimonials for other members in order to get one written
- Blogrolling a blog to get blogrolled in return
- And so on. The logic here is pretty simple. It's called make nice.

Giving and Getting (Paying) Attention

- It is not clear online when attention is being paid to a person
- As it is not clear when we are getting attention
- Insofar as we are unable to determine the meaning of any linguistic act with certainty, affective communication (meta communication) helps us:
 - Distinguish a person's interest in us
 - From his/her interest in what we say
 - And both from his/her position on what we say (agreement or contradiction)
 - As well as his/her liking of us
- And given all the uncertainty surrounding the intentions of actors online
- It makes sense that the unspoken be read into or from acts as well as through them