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Assignment 3: Observing and Analyzing an Information-Seeking Experience

Kyle[1] is a college senior studying computer science at a large public university in

southern Indiana. He has worked for many years in web development, and is particularly skilled

in object-oriented programming languages. Kyle grew up in a dual-income household, spending

most of his time at home unsupervised with a personal computer. Consequently, he candidly

characterizes himself as "raised by the Internet." Kyle also lives on the outer edge of the city

limits, and does not own a car. A single bus stops by his apartment complex once an hour, with

limited service on weekends. Trips into the city center require advanced planning and a

minimum half-hour commute. Due to Kyle's personal and professional background, as well as

his living arrangements, he conducts almost all of his information seeking on the World Wide

Web. For the search discussed here, he exclusively chose Internet-based resources without

considering alternative sources as viable possibilities.

During the hour I observed Kyle, he was involved in putting together a personal guide to

"conquer" the Nintendo 64 game *Paper Mario* in his free time. Kyle found it difficult to

articulate exactly why he felt compelled to "100%" the game. He simply said that he likes the

game, and that he always tries to 100% the games he owns, even if he received no recognition

for the effort. He had recently done the same with the game *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the*

New World, and he wanted to begin a similar project. When asked what conquering a video game

entails, Kyle answered that he would not know until he began putting his guide together. Though

he had played the game several times before and had some idea of what he would need to

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[1] A pseudonym for confidentiality

accomplish, he would discover what met the definition of 100% completion while he was

performing his research.

As soon as Kyle opened his favorite Internet browser (Google Chrome) on his desktop,

he typed the domain of the site "Game FAQs" into the address bar. Kyle said that he always goes

to Game FAQs first for any questions he has about video games. He trusts the people who post

walkthroughs and participate on the message boards: "They generally know what they're doing."

After answering a daily poll about his gaming habits and commenting to me about the results, he

located the page dedicated to the version of *Paper Mario* he owned. He began to open any

walkthroughs or guides whose titles interested him in new Chrome tabs, and then searched the

message boards when he had particular questions about the content he saw. When these searches

failed to return adequate answers, Kyle "[had] to resort to Google," though he expressed an

intense dislike for the search engine. The Google results led Kyle to various independent sites,

but he ultimately returned to Game FAQs to finish his information gathering.

Kyle's choice of Game FAQs as his primary source of information was based largely on

the site's high degree of social presence. Social presence theory, first described by Short,

Williams and Christie in 1976, describes the interactions in computer-mediated communications

in terms of "how real participants feel to each other" (Newberry, 2010). The positive attributes

Kyle ascribed to the Game FAQs website centered not on its aesthetics or usability, but on the

merits of the other invisible members of the community contributing to its resources. He

maintains a profile on the site with details about his personal collection of video games, and

takes great pride in marking that he has "conquered" these games for others to see. During his

search, he noted particular authors of walkthroughs, identified by their screen names, to evaluate

how much he should trust the information presented to him. When a resource failed to provide

him with useful information (or contained information he knew to be incorrect), he attributed the failure to the individual author in personal, unflattering terms, rather than to the Game FAQs website.

This sense of community and involvement overrode any inadequacies of the website as an interface. The limited topic-only message board search rarely returned useful results, and often returned none for simple queries. The self-contained structure of the walkthroughs, presented as a long list of links, required Kyle to read long blocks of text to see whether a resource would be useful. He spent a large amount of time scrolling through information he already knew to see if there were hidden tips he did not. None of this detracted from his confidence in the site as the "best" resource to consult.

Ironically, Kyle only found Google's trillion-page full-text index useful insofar as it allowed him to more easily search the same Game FAQs walkthroughs and message boards he liked indirectly. He was reluctant to switch to the search engine when the need arose, making comments like the following:

> *The results I get from Google are [expletive]. They never seem to have any*
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> *relationship to what I want to know. I have to fight Google to get it to search for*
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> *what I wanted to search for.*

While I watched, Kyle's queries to Google returned adequate answers to his questions within the first page of results. However, this did not alter his perception of the search engine. In general, Kyle's evaluation of the usefulness of a resource was based primarily on past experience with it or similar mediums, rather than its immediately observable worth. For example, Kyle first located a table of types of enemies on an independent website, but he was put off by the gaudy colors and a layout "straight from the 90s." He later located an identical table on the "Mario

Wiki," but concluded that *this* table was "probably more official and complete." Kyle did not

trust the first website because, due to past experiences with badly designed vanity pages, he sees

the competence of a web master as directly proportional to their competence as an information

provider. However, though he conceded the worth of that particular page of the Mario Wiki, he

did not consult it for answers to any of his questions after that. When prompted, he said that he

was surprised to find that table there because "other wikis are worthless." He cited disappointing

experiences with the Final Fantasy Wiki, which "didn't even have an article on equipment."

Though the two wikis were probably maintained by entirely separate groups of people, Kyle had

concluded that wikis overall were not worth his time because the Final Fantasy Wiki had wasted

it.

An interesting aspect of Kyle's experience was that he tended to *infer* answers rather than

find definitive ones to his queries. While reading a walkthrough, it occurred to him that he did

not know whether the game capped the number of badges[2] he could obtain. When searches in

both Game FAQs and Google for "Paper Mario badge limit," "Paper Mario badge cap," and other

variants returned results only concerned with the game's sequel, *Paper Mario: The Thousand

Year Door*, Kyle said, "If no one's mentioned it, I guess there isn't one. Only in the sequel." This

behavior flies in the face of conventional wisdom that information needs or gaps in

understanding are filled by discrete answers.

Another unexpected phenomenon in Kyle's search was his non-linear approach to

gathering data for his personal guide. Most models of information seeking depict a seeker's

activities as neatly constructed arrows flowing from point A, to point B, to point C. Even Bates'

model of "berrypicking" presumes that each resource or query variation leads to a thought, which

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[2] Badges are items in *Paper Mario* that are "equipped as accessories...They may increase stats, provide
unusual abilities, or give Mario access to new moves." (Mario Wiki)

modifies the query, which leads to other resources etc. (Bates, 1989). Kyle's approach to browsing was more like berrypicking in a field with multiple bushes. He would pursue one line of inquiry, and then drop it to pursue another tidbit that caught his fancy, only to return abruptly for no discernible reason.

For example, after selecting a message board topic on tattles[3], Kyle read a poster's off-hand comment that he already had all of the recipes[4]. He mused aloud that he didn't know recipes were "tallyable" (tracked by the game) and embarked on a new search for comprehensive lists and other threads. After some time in that vein, he became distracted by the idea of finding all of the hidden blocks[5]. That search reached a dead-end, and he seamlessly switched back to his recipe track as if he had been pursuing it all along. In this manner, Kyle accumulated many open tabs and unanswered questions, opening them up again when he stalled or grew bored with other ones. He also periodically stopped to reevaluate where he stood and close any "useless" tabs he had open, during which he selected new paths to try. Some paths were lost altogether, until I shared my notes and reminded him to pick them up again.

Kyle's experience searching for information on *Paper Mario* reveals some weaknesses in prevailing models of information seeking behavior. He was unaware of any gaps in understanding prior to beginning his search; in fact, he expressed that the point of his research was to discover things he did not know about the game. He had an affective bias towards certain resources and away from others based on complex criteria--not just their accessibility or

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[3] In *Paper Mario*, Mario's side-kick Goombario "tattles" on enemies to reveal their backgrounds and weaknesses. Tattling causes the enemy's statistics to appear over its head each time it is encountered thereafter.

[4] Another character in the game, Tayce T., cooks "recipes" for Mario depending on the "ingredients" he gives her. Given different recipes, the player can use her to combine items he buys or finds into new ones.

[5] Blocks in the Mario games float above ground, triggered to drop items or coins when the player jumps to hit them. *Paper Mario* contains some blocks hidden from view, which only become visible after they are triggered.

usefulness to his immediate needs. Overall, his search pattern could be characterized as

hyperactive, with his attention constantly shifting from one line of inquiry to another. While this

single search experience does not disprove the validity of these models, it does bring up new

inconsistencies and questions that should be resolved by future ones.

References

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