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Farewell to Metaphors

I HAVE ALWAYS LIKED metaphoric interfaces. When the Internet Public Library (IPL) and the Engineering Information Village (Ei Village) first came out in the mid-1990s, they both made good use of metaphors. IPL used the metaphor of a small library reference/reading room, complete with reference librarian sitting behind the desk, ready-reference books on the desktop, bookshelves arranged in subject categories, and a study area. Ei Village took users on a walk down a small-town street, with possible stops at a government building, a library, a shopping mall, a telecommunications tower, and other structures that led to different types of information.

In both cases, the metaphoric interface illustrated the entire range of resources offered by the system. Moving the mouse to click on a bookshelf or a government building would bring up lists of specific resources to search. I found these interfaces intuitive and strangely comforting. They took me into a virtual world that was familiar.

Abandoning metaphors

Clearly, most users did not agree. Both IPL and Ei Village have abandoned their metaphoric interfaces, replacing them with interfaces that are mere lists of titles of sources, a search box, and all text. Just the facts: uncluttered, linear, and boring. But boring seems to be a virtue with information retrieval interfaces, and the switch was deliberate (and welcomed by users).

A former employee of Ei Village told me when they made the switch, the new interface was much better received. Search boxes and a "serious" information search and retrieval interface looks more appropriate to engineers and engineering

librarians who use the system in the workplace. The metaphor looked too much like a game or a frivolous web site. Clearly, searchers make a distinction between serious information sources used at work and shopping or entertainment sources surfed at home.

Boring information retrieval interfaces are a virtue in the eyes of users

Cultural differences

Another problem was the connotation of the "village" metaphor. In many European countries, village connotes a backwater—an unsophisticated, behind-the-times sort of place. Clearly not the message Ei Village intended.

Such differences in cultural interpretations are one of the big problems with metaphors. How they are perceived can vary considerably from country to country, culture to culture, or even person to person. What to me is the comforting image of a reference librarian sitting behind a desk might be an intimidating or negative image to someone who has had difficulty with authority figures. If you don't know what the U.S. Capitol building looks like, the message that government information lies behind this picture might be lost.

No longer necessary

IPL reaches a much more diverse audience than Ei Village, and its library metaphor was an instant hit, receiving thousands of reference questions each year. IPL users seemed to appreciate software that was easy to use and fulfilled expectations of what a library should be. But today many people spend hours comfortably dwelling in a virtual world.

John Northup, usability specialist

at the Internet Public Library, School of Information, University of Michigan, worked on the redesign team for IPL. He explained to me that "in 1995, when the IPL was launched, the very idea of an 'Internet Public Library' was novel and bold...[and] our users didn't have anything else to compare us to. We had to make sure that our users would be able to feel oriented in this new environment, and we did that by packaging our information architecture in a recognizable metaphor."

Users and the web have changed since those early days. According to Northup, "People have become more web-savvy to the point that it seems rather condescending to suggest to our visitors that they might require such accommodation."

Metaphoric interfaces have other problems as well. Relying on image maps at every step of navigation becomes unwieldy, or, as Northup puts it, "The elements become difficult for the eye to scan; they compete against each other for prominence. It wasn't always clear to users which items in the picture were clickable and which were just 'window dressing.'" Also, image maps weren't generated dynamically; the IPL systems people had to re-create each image manually when new subject headings were added.

Old-fashioned

My positive feeling about metaphors probably labels me as old-fashioned. According to Northup, "The whole notion of metaphors in computing began as an accommodation to office workers accustomed to (physical) files, folders, mailboxes, pages, trash bins..."

Maybe metaphors aren't necessary. The message now is that an interface shouldn't intrude or add extraneous graphics to the business of online searching. As the world returns to functional and plain text-based interfaces, perhaps it shows that users of the web have caught up with all of us searchers who still secretly use the command-driven interfaces developed 30 years ago.



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