

Clay Spinuzzi



TRACING GENRES THROUGH ORGANIZATIONS

A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design



Tracing Genres through Organizations

Acting with Technology

Bonnie Nardi, Victor Kaptelinin, and Kirsten Foot, editors

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A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design

Clay Spinuzzi

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Series Foreword

The MIT Press *Acting with Technology* series is concerned with the study of meaningful human activity as it is mediated by tools and technologies. The goal of the series is to publish the best new books—both research monographs and textbooks—that contribute to an understanding of technology as a crucial facet of human activity enacted in rich social and physical contexts.

The focus of the series is on tool-mediated processes of working, playing, and learning in and across a wide variety of social settings. The series explores developments in postcognitivist theory and practice from the fields of sociology, communication, education, and organizational studies, as well as from science and technology studies, human-computer interaction and computer-supported collaborative work. It aims to encompass theoretical frameworks including cultural-historical activity theory, actor network theory, distributed cognition, and those developed through ethnomethodological and grounded theory approaches.

In the first book of the series, Clay Spinuzzi offers a new perspective on work mediated by information technologies. The book brings to the foreground the evolutionary development of work practices through the everyday, collaborative, creative efforts of the actual users of technology. This aspect of computer-mediated work is often neglected by researchers and practitioners. Typical user studies, even those conducted according to most versions of user-centered design, focus on user needs and problems that should be addressed by specially trained designers, but the studies often ignore the invisible innovations of various kinds made in the course of everyday work to address the same or similar needs and problems.

To analyze the evolution of mediated work practices, Spinuzzi proposes a new methodology called *genre tracing*. This methodology, which draws on both genre theory and activity theory, enables the identification of integral units of work—official and unofficial genres—and follows their transformations at several levels of analysis concurrently. By providing insight into developmental transformations of mediated work, genre tracing can help capture the “design solutions” emerging in daily work and integrate them into new, more useful and usable systems and applications. Therefore, this analytical tool, and the book as a whole, will be of interest to both researchers and practitioners involved in the design of information technologies.

Bonnie Nardi
Victor Kaptelinin
Kirsten Foot

Preface

Denise Schmandt-Besserat argued in 1986 that Sumerian writing, which was at that time considered the oldest example of writing, essentially started as a quirky Sumerian accounting system. According to her account, tax collectors began making clay tokens representing livestock, bushels of grain, and containers of oil to tally the actual goods they had collected. Since it became unwieldy to carry around these tokens, eventually Sumerian bureaucrats began making clay “envelopes” to hold them. And since it was not possible to see inside these envelopes, they would press each token into the side of the clay envelope to make an imprint before firing it. The resulting group of impressions functioned as a tally of the livestock. Eventually some clever accountant realized that once the impressions were made, the tokens were moot. Soon the envelopes became round tablets and scribes eventually began imitating the tokens’ impressions with a stylus. The rest, as they say, is history.

If Schmandt-Besserat’s origin tale is correct, writing—perhaps the most powerful and protean tool we have ever devised, the one so many ancients believed to be a gift from the gods—can be traced back to a series of slapdash innovations largely meant to ease the lives of clerical workers. In the short term, these innovations were more or less invisible. Schmandt-Besserat estimates that 4,700 years went by between the invention of tokens and the innovation of clay envelopes; another 50 years or so went by between that innovation and the next one, that of impressing the tokens onto the envelopes. Another 100 years went by before the envelopes became tablets.

Contemporary workplaces are arguably even more fertile places for such innovations than the Fertile Crescent turned out to be, and innovations