

Experience design thinking: A fish called wonder

By [Simon de Haast](#)

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This is part one of a three-part series of articles.



“I’m not sure who discovered water but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a fish,” said Marshall McLuhan (he is more famous for his aphorisms “The medium is the message” and “the global village”).

What he meant by this is that it’s really difficult to be aware of one’s environment if one is immersed in it.

This is why language and metaphor probing are such powerful tools, as they have become our invisible environments. The clichés we spin eventually lose their meaning. In spite of this, language analysis is also a great tool for making creative leaps and connections when we unpack meaning or declodk the invisible.

For example, if one is trying to be innovative within the data and computer security field, it is by examining the metaphors used, that we see that it is a world borrowed from microbiology: virus, infection, self-replication, vectors.

Borrowing metaphors or language

George Lakoff, a professor of cognitive science and linguistics at Berkeley co-wrote a book on this (*Metaphors We Live By*). He stated that we are significantly influenced by the metaphors we use to explain complex things or use them as shortcuts to cognition. Just look at your software app icons: trash can, floppy disk, scissors, envelope.

While these shortcuts can narrow our thinking, they also help us make novel connections. Borrowing metaphors or language from one domain and applying the different meaning to another area can help spark new perceptions and understanding.

For example, next time you're in a brainstorm listen for the words being used and dig deeper into their meanings and etymology. This will trick the brain into new creative corridors. What if we started using metaphors and language from a different world to describe the data and computer security space, such as medieval castles with moats and towers?

Innovation opportunities

What if we reframed the idea of flying cars (with the attendant automotive and aviation mental models) instead, as people-carrying autonomous drones; this opens up a range of different possibilities (e.g. not needing to learn how to fly) if we're not grounded in a vehicular or aeroplane paradigm. What innovation opportunities could these new thinking models open up for us?

This domain borrowing can be extended beyond language to whole industries, adding both reframing and related worlds to your creative quiver. If you examine the cinema-going experience, it's not that different from the airline experience at its core. You buy a ticket, stand in a queue, sit for an hour or two, get up and leave. What unique aspects can we borrow from the one area and use to inspire and reframe a service delivery model?

McLuhan's central thesis is that our environments are invisible. Brand environments are no different, and this is at the core of what experience design addresses. I shall be diving into this murky pool in part two.



Experience design thinking: Using tourists, fish and maps [Part 2]

Simon de Haast 16 Mar 2020



ABOUT SIMON DE HAAST

Simon is Head of Experience and Service Design at Digitas Liquorice and has been helping teams and clients for nearly two decades to think more systemically about customer experience and how outside-in thinking can open up customer-led innovation opportunities.

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