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ABSTRAKTI

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## ***Liminality informatics: an information perspective on ritual activity***

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My presentation examines ritual activities - including both religious and playful - as information environments. This is of particular significance due to the fact that the cognitive changes present in such activities require certain forms of information-environmental manipulation in order to properly emerge.

That ritual and play share a common root was first suggested by Johan Huizinga (1939). Since then, the idea has been examined by both personality development and game studies scholars alike, but not beyond surface similarities. Recent research by myself and Andreas Lieberoth (Harviainen & Lieberoth, forthcoming; Lieberoth & Harviainen, forthcoming; Harviainen, in review) has shown, however, that this connection indeed exists - at the level of information manipulation. Therefore a combination of tools from both library and information science and the study of religion grants us new knowledge of why and how rituals affect the human mind.

The participants of a ritual activity enter a social contract - often an implicit, undiscussed one - to treat the activity as something special. The contract may be based on various key components: Religious ones on faith, games on the desire to play, interaction rituals on safety and predictability, but they may just as well be based on social pressure or the need to belong. Regardless of those reasons, however, the contract requires the participants to keep up the ritual and protect it from disruptions, i.e. the entrance of hostile information into the “magic circle” where the activity happens.

While not necessarily done consciously, this situational information blunting uses a set of tools to preserve the ritual intact. For example, background information is needed to understand the significance and function of many ritual elements, but to ask for that information would be disruptive. Inexperienced participants therefore resort (and are expected to resort) to berrypicking techniques: Instead of asking direct questions from other participants, they pick up clues from here and there and construct a functional reference frame from those bits and pieces.

Certain rituals extend this further. Imagistic rites, i.e. the so-called “rites of terror”, work by keeping the participants constantly on their proverbial toes, by denying them clearly defined

information requirements. They know they need more information in order to make sense of what is taking place, but not what that information might be. In library and information science terms, such rites are based on an extended anomalous state of knowledge (ASK).

The social and physical isolation of ritual participants - along, if possible, with the extended ASK - makes those participants dependant on present cognitive authorities for their information searches. A person's knowledge of the world is always incomplete, and given that ritual activities take place in temporary (often fictional) "worlds", this is even more true in such occasions. These worlds are effectively re-signification zones where normal interpretations and affordances may be replaced by new, situationally relevant ones. To understand the new interpretations and affordances requires new knowledge, the basis of which may not have been disclosed prior to the activity. Therefore the participants have an increased need of information, but less sources for it.

Ritual environments may also contain a special kind of cognitive authority. This so-called directive information source has the social permission to re-define document properties and situational interpretations, in a manner which may contradict perceived reality. For example, for committed ritual participants, consecrated communal wine in a Catholic mass really is the blood of Christ despite its chemical properties, because an authority (in this case, dogma invested through the priest performing the consecration) says so. This is possible, because ritual activities are situations where participants have to "act as if it were real", even if they cannot perceive all supposedly present factors. They construct meaning through the use of dual cognition. This is what makes the information properties of rituals so attractive also to game designers who seek either increased arousal, learning potential, or both.

In conclusion: Ritual circumstances significantly alter their participants' information behaviour, in order to enable cognitive changes. By way of boundary control, ASK manipulation and pre-imposed limitations to potential information sources, they create a reliance on local, highly experience-supporting sources. Assisted by a social contract which states that to participate in the ritual is indeed important, this effectively forms a feedback loop: To accept the initial limitations is to gain access to a stronger, community-building (maybe even life-altering) experience, the undergoing of which makes it meaningful to have accepted the initial limitations in the first place. Without the manipulation of the temporarily imposed information environment, ritual activities could not affect human cognition then way they do.

For the study of rituals and ritual-like games, this approach offers new insight on how the ritual mindset gets constructed. For library and information science, it offers an excellent view on just how strong the effect of an information environment can be to information behaviour. Both findings furthermore complement one another, so that by studying one, we will be increasing our knowledge of the other as well.

The study of information phenomena in ritual activities also shows us a new facet of the versatility of our field: In studying something related to the millennia-old history of rites, it also tells us new things about cutting-edge games and simulations. In examining information-environmental manipulation, it grants new insight into cognition. In studying human activities as information systems, it builds bridges to other disciplines. It claims new paths where we can significantly contribute, in areas formerly thought outside our field of expertise.

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