Two Readings of Cargo Cult Theorizing

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INTRODUCTION

As people whose research expertise revolves not only around questions of theory and practice but also of interaction and artifacts, it perhaps behooves us to consider what kinds of things theory-grounded objects and artifacts might be and how they function. Indeed, the workshop description revolves perhaps less around knowledge production than it does around knowledge products, which would draw our attention as HCI researchers to how the gaps between products and production might operate, in much the same way as we might distinguish between interfaces and interaction.

I want to approach these topics in a roundabout and perhaps unexpected manner, through the lens of Melanisian cargo cults. The term "cargo cult" gets thrown around pejoratively in science circles from time to time (Feynman 1974), but I will argue that there may be useful lessons suggested by the metaphor if we take it a little more seriously than we might at first imagine. I will lay out my argument through two different readings of the cargo cults.

A TRADITIONAL READING

Our first reading starts with a fairly conventional account of cargo cults as they are often understood (and were described by Feynman). By this reading, during the Second World War, the Allied forces deployed in the southern Pacific built and operated bases which would be remotely stocked by air drops. Conventional practice involved building housing and an air strip and, once operative, this air strip would be able to accommodate planes that brought food, medical supplies, people, and materiel. Local indigenous population, many of whom lived hunter-gatherer existences, were confused by the way that the soldiers seemed able to call down from the sky the sorts of resources that they themselves had to work so hard for, and became convinced that the soldiers had access to some powerful magic. When the military bases were abandoned, the indigenous people took them over, fashioning for themselves out of local materials things that looked like the tools by which the magic had been performed, such as radios, microphones, and headphones, and they then attempted to use these to enact the magic that the soldiers had performed and so summon for themselves these same sorts of goods. This fairly conventional telling of the story of the cargo cults trucks in arguments of innocence, naivety, and primitivism, of course, but it fundamentally suggests that a confusion between cause and effect that arose in the encounter between cultures caused the Melanisians to believe that artifacts embodied a greater power than they actually did.

The way in which this story provides us with a perspective upon theory and intermediate artifacts in the multidisciplinary practice of CSCW is obvious enough. My thinking here was sparked by the relationship between knowledge production and knowledge products (or intermediate products) in the workshop call – a relationship is being suggested between the processes of producing knowledge and the artifacts that arise in the course of that process, such that the artifacts can, it is suggested, be evaluated or compared in order to tell us something about how the acts of knowledge production might be assessed or understood. The artifacts may indeed be intimately connected to the kinds of knowledge production being undertaken, or even the kinds of knowledge that result, but no straightforward relationship exists.

For example, I have written extensively about various putative relationships within HCI between ethnography and design. On various occasions, I've suggested that the limitations that we place in HCI on this configuration is founded on a misunderstanding of the nature of ethnography (e.g., Dourish 2006). I'm inclined to suggest too though that they may similarly founder on a misunderstanding of design. Work on "research through design" such as that described by Zimmerman et al (2007) exemplifies an alternative approach, which I have also occasionally referred to as "ethnography through design" (rather than ethnography of design or ethnography for design.) It suggests that in an encounter between ethnographic practice and design practice, the goal of design as a practice in which to engage might well be to generate a deeper understanding of ethnographic materials – that is, not to produce a product that anyone might ever want to use but to generate an understanding that provides insight upon materials gathered and analyzed ethnographically. (Interestingly, where prominent ethnographers have become interested in design, what interests them is often not so much the objects or the grappling with materials, but the process and context – the studio and the crit.)

A HISTORICAL READING

Even the first reading of cargo cults, simplistic as it is, suggests that the fundamental context for cargo cults was cultural encounter, and provides us too with the opportunity to think about the way that theories and theory-artifacts might be read within a similar context of encounter and

difference. However, to take this further, I want to explore a second reading of cargo cults drawing on the anthropological rather than the popular literature (e.g. Lawrence 1964). An anthropological reading of cargo cults contextualizes their origins within two significant larger frames – both the longer-term colonial experience and the role of religion as a site of colonization.

Melanisian people encountered wartime military bases in the contexts of a considerably longer history of colonial occupation and missionary contact. Singularly and in concert, these two elements had a strong impact upon what later came to be called "cargo cults." Perhaps better described as Cargo movements, these should be thought of, contra the first reading, not as naïve misappropriations of the physical forms of western infrastructure, but rather as religiously-inflected resistance movements – movements with distinct political and anti-colonial positions that responded to longer histories of occupation and repression.

The relationship between colonial officers and settlers and the indigenous people had long been marked by questions of access to goods and the relationship between work and wellbeing. Colonial officers insisted that the hunter-gatherer communities of indigenous peoples should be incorporated into a Western mode of wage labor, and emphasized the importance of diligent work as the basis of prosperity of both the soul and the body. To the indigenous peoples, what was most remarkable about the colonialists was how little they had to work, in comparison to the wealth and goods that they had at their disposal. What was initially accepted as a simple equation – "you must work (for us) and then you too will be wealthy (like us)" – quickly turned into a source of resentment as it became clear that the goods and wealth of the colonists was not to be forthcoming. Indigenous people's frustration turned specifically over the question of the goods that were being denied to them even though they worked in the manner that the colonists demanded. Seeing the access to goods that seemed to come so easily to the Western settlers, indigenous peoples came to ask why it was not to being shared, and what was needed in order to make it available to them. In other words, the seeds of the Cargo movements lay in specific forms of resistance and discontent over the nature of access to prosperity inherent in the colonial encounter.

These resistance movements were further inflected by spiritual considerations that themselves were rooted in the colonial experience. Missionaries had been active in Melanesia throughout the colonial period, and had attempted to displace traditional animist religions with various forms of Christian practice. These belief systems operated in an uneasy juxtaposition with traditional systems of spirituality. Lawrence suggests that Christian teachings about the relationship between "God the Father" and "God the Son" allowed a metaphorical resonance with traditional spiritual belief, particularly the relationship between Anut

and Manup, both deities in traditional religion. Some missionaries were ignorant of this association; some knew of it but accepted it as a basis for attempting to communicate Christian beliefs; others were at pains to attempt to disentangle the two belief systems. However, the syncretic integration of Christian and traditional myth persisted even when invisible to the missionaries themselves. The idea, stressed by the missionaries, that it was God and Christ who were the source of the colonists' prosperity was similarly incorporated into the syncretic practices. In later elaborations of the Cargo belief system, this equation became even more complex, as the idea that the Christian God was also a local deity was blended with teachings of Christ's Second Coming to create a belief system in which the local diety had departed to become the Westerners' God, and would soon return across the ocean to bring the same wealth and prosperity to the local people – a belief that was, for some, projected onto a political figure returning from a visit to Australia.

CARGO CULT THEORY

Where Feynman speaks of "cargo cult science," then, in order to invoke notions of "primitive" thought, imitative magic, and meaningless ritual, we might instead think about the way the metaphor speaks to questions of syncretism, dispossession, and power. We might ask what kinds of blendings we seek between disciplines, and what happens when the practices of one discipline are interpreted from within the frame of another. We might ask how perceived imbalances of power, wealth, or access to goods and authority create contexts within which different mythologies are valued or celebrated. We might ask how the encounter between different systems of knowing and acting runs the risk of producing hybrids or combinations that lose the meaning of the objects that they incorporate.

From this perspective, then, I wonder about the value of lining up representational practices in order to compare their theoretical power, or indeed of drawing from different disciplinary practices different modes of analysis under the assumption that we must all be talking about the same thing. To retain our anthropological metaphor, we might ask what kinds of fetishistic power representations are granted in this conversation, and recognize two the operation of different kinds of politics in the encounters that we might stage. The dangers of cargo cult science, I would suggest, lie not in the kinds of dismissive laments that Feynman offered, but rather in the failure to understand the contexts of encounters between disciplines that inevitably limn specific efforts at theory-building.

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