Motivated movement

There are times in life when we have a clear goal in mind and a fairly good idea of how to achieve it. We're highly motivated. But we also have enough information to make informed decisions. We'll know when we're getting 'warmer' or 'colder' as we move through a space or structure. We'll usually have strategies for efficiently getting to our well-understood goal. This is motivated movement.

Motivated movement is the first category in my model of navigation. The alliteration might seem a little strained. But the idea of motivation and 'conditioned' behaviour is important to this category. The behaviours have a high degree of intent. This intent combines with (increasingly) ordered information-seeking strategies.

There are times when your actors have a plan for their information-related needs. They have a well understood information need – and they can describe it well too. They understand their need and choose a strategy to satisfy it, so they move with motivation.

Motivated movement
Navigating

A type of highly directed browsing. An actor will move with a good understanding of the structure (or be able to predict the structure accurately).

They'll have a specific known topic or target that they can describe with precision. The combination of understanding the target and structure enables them to move with confidence and efficiency.

Before 'navigating' there might be (an often unconscious) targeting, as the actor chooses their area of focus.

There may be periods of sweeping where the user will scan broadly to orient themselves in the information architecture. But this will be for confirmation. They have a good understanding of the structure and where they are. Change detection will be quick.

During navigating the user will engage in systematic differentiation as they compare the thing they're looking for with things in front of them. They will often (sometimes unconsciously) discriminate and optimise their movement to arrive at their target.

Conditioned browsing

The actor's movement will be motivated and reasonably skilled as they move within a pre-identified area. They may be directing their movement within and towards a certain type of content or topic. They are purposeful, but their need is usually coarse or general. But they'll recognise when they are moving closer to their target.

Conditioning will usually increase through browsing. The actor will develop their understanding and mental model of their information need and information architecture, often enabling navigating in the future.

They'll often refine their target through conditioning as they expand their understanding of both the structure and the target. They're more likely to 'take risks.' They're motivated by both their information need and their (sometimes unconscious) desire to understand the structure or domain.

Browsing will usually involve the actor sweeping – scanning broadly. Sweeping helps to identify next steps in movement, rather than verify current understanding. Sweeping will be supported by discriminating, as the actor engages in evaluation and selection of where to go next.

Transactional search

35:65
Know it
when I see it.

Transactional search is a tools-based strategy for getting something specific. The actor is determined. Their choice of a specific tools-based strategy hints at the tight focus and high degree of motivation. The structured method is reliant on a good understanding of need and focus – fine granularity.

It will begin with targeting and keyword/phrase construction. Depending on the tool the actor will then engage in a process of evaluation, discrimination and optimisation (where needed).

An actor is more likely to feel frustrated if they're encouraged to switch modes. They'll likely blame the performance of the tool – damaging trust and undermining the experience. So while transactional search is often followed by the same types of behaviours as in browsing, it's helpful to think of the entire search as a single behaviour set you need to support.

During transactional search a designer might focus on supporting evaluation and discrimination. There might also be opportunities to enable more successful keyword/phrase construction.

Delightful discovery

Good navigation often results in discovery – ask Captain Cook. Sometimes we want to encourage and support an explorer mindset in our audience. We create new content, features and services. Information architects must be able to empower actors to find them. My second category focuses on discovery.

Delightful Discovery sees actors getting knowledge, learning, gaining sight or finding out about something previously unseen or unknown. It's "delightful". And that word isn't wanky marketing speak or lazy alliteration. Discovery can be tiring and un-nerving. It is more likely to see periods of doubt and uncertainty – ask Captain Cook. Considering how you make discovery more delightful should improve your designs.

Like my Motivated movement category, Delightful discovery has three behaviour sets. The sets help you think about the needs and motivations of actors.

Exploring

Exploring promises more than it demands. It encourages risk-taking – sometimes by managing and minimising risk – other times by increasing motivation. Exploring is sometimes playful. Sometimes it involves challenge – it's not always straightforward.

Exploring will see the actor screen a large coarse set of information. It's relatively unstructured, seeing varying degrees of direction. There is unevenness and inconsistency in confidence as the actor pivots, sometimes falteringly, through a structure or space.

Exploring will usually begin with, at best, an ill-formed need. Sometimes there won't be a specific need. But exploring will usually result in conditioning and the identification and refinement of an information need. Exploring can transition into Browsing and Navigating – but it doesn't have to – depending on the mindset of the actor.

Exploring involves sweeping followed by directed movement. The actor may return to locations to re-orient themselves. Exploring may be carried out through monitoring to passively expands knowledge or understanding of a structure or domain.

Delightful discovery
Monitoring

Monitoring enables the actor to discover updates or expand knowledge. It occurs when the actor has a well-defined and bounded interest or target. They identify and develop strategies to improve their knowledge or access to information about this specific area of interest.

Monitoring is active, where an actor returns to trusted sources for updated information. This may be at the smallest level of refreshing a stream or view to check for updated information. Or it may be at a wider service or product level to check for changes. Active monitoring involves conscious and deliberate behaviour.

When it's well designed, Monitoring will often lead to a more focused and motivated behaviour.

Passive monitoring is often enabled by a specific action – like subscribing to a service or feed – but at some point doesn't require the performance of an action – the monitoring is automated. A good example might be push notifications based on some preference or subscription. Passive monitoring enables an actor to expand their knowledge and understanding with little effort. It's similar to Passive discovery, but requires a conscious act to begin the monitoring.

Passive discovery

Sometimes we find something unexpected, often while looking for something else. Passive discovery might sound like the sort of thing that's difficult to design. But serendipity is at the heart of lots of delightful products and services. Design decisions can increase the likelihood of this being a characteristic of your product or service.

Passive discovery is reliant on targeting, recognition and movement. Your design needs to spark the interest of the actor to pull them into movement towards a new, but now-identified target. Through the movement a need is identified and satisfied almost simultaneously. Passive discovery is delightful – it feels like you get something for nothing.

Foggy finding

Information is a delicate, immaterial thing. Information-rich environments present challenges – to designers and actors navigating them. Environments intersect and overlap. Actors have different needs at different times. Information changes. Content and the spaces that contain it alter and evolve. The means to access information vary. Truth is ever to be found in simplicity, and not in the multiplicity and confusion of things. But things are sometimes confusing, so how can we support actors when they're confused.

Whereas Discovery support unknown item finding, there are times in life when you know what you want, but you can't get to it. Discovery is unexpected. But the expectations of the actor during foggy finding can lead to frustration. Foggy finding should be short. Prolonging this type of behaviour should only be done artfully and with reason.

Refinding

The actor needs to find something that they've accessed before. They know that it exists (or have reason to believe that it does). But they may not know where it lives (or can be accessed from).

Content is now dissaggregated, re-aggregated and transcluded all over the place. This makes the construction of a mental model by audiences more difficult. Structures, as well as page layouts are becoming responsive. Algorithms are deciding on significance. Machine are arranging of views, which change regularly. Re-finding things can be a significant challenge.

Consider the content or areas most likely to be returned to. Pay particular attention to often or fast changing areas of your design. These are the areas where failed re-finding are most likely. How might you re-direct an actor attempting to re-find something if the location of it has changed?

An actor may adopt a transactional search strategy to re-find. But they might not. Others might prefer to navigate or browse towards the thing they're hoping to re-call. Some may engage in repeated revisiting or refreshing, unaware that this startegy won't work.

Hunting

60:40
Differentiate &
take risks.

An actor who is motivated with a fairly strong sense of what he wants. A 'hunter' also has a range of strategies for achieving their goal. He has a strong sense that something exists. He'll probably recognise it when he sees it and he has a plan for how to find it.

Lots of hunting in the modern world probably starts at Google. There's a definite beginning to hunting. It is a motivated set of behaviours driven by a specific, focused intent. But it sometimes also implies a slight level of promiscuity. You know what you want, but you don't necessarily care where you get it from – sorry Henry.

Hunting will see the actor starting, orienting, moving, differentiating, extracting, optimising. It may involve monitoring and multiple concurrent strategies. It is high effort and requires motivation. And maybe this is the area of opportunity for designers. How do you maintain motivation through a hunt? How might you transition to a more passive behaviour, if preferred? How do you build loyalty through success – is there an emotional element in the way you design to support hunting?

Uncovering

An actor will systematically work through a range of options to reach an identified goal. Uncovering can be frustrating. You know that something exists, but you're not sure how to get to it. During uncovering there is something obscured or inaccessible about the thing you want.

My most recent example of this is when interacting with voice-based navigation. I know that there are certain word combinations that will unlock the power of Alexa. But I don't know what they are. Like some mediocre alchemist, I don't quite know the magic words to unlock the secrets I desire.

During uncovering it might be that the link between information and affordance is faulty – so that it isn't an affordance at all. While some designs enable certain actions and interactions, if they're not meaningful, they're not useful. Designers should consider how discernible and recognisable the features of their navigation are. They should also consider predictability in the interface.

Not necessarily navigation

The edges of things are interesting. IAs should be comfortable identifying that distinct boundary that marks the end of one thing and the beginning of another. We know the power of thinking about the 'thingness' that makes a thing the thing that it is. But we also know the power of the seams and loose joins we can use to connect things.

My model of navigation extends beyond the behaviours that typically think of as navigation. It incorporates things that aren't navigation. But these things often sit beside it in the story of an experience. Some of the navigation behaviours I've described aren't particularly enjoyable. Most times 'navigation' is only ever going to be a means to an end. This category considers the ends (and beginnings) of the other navigation behaviours.

* This is particularly true of cricket, where the boundary is an essential part of the scoring mechanism.

Consuming

People come to the places I design to consume stuff. It's usually words, pictures, sounds, videos – content. Yummy content.

There are certain type of consumption that you can improve by borrowing some thinking from navigation. Learning is a type of consumption where information discovery is inherent. There's a strong sense of movement and progression through learning content. If you're designing learning you should consider some of the behaviours named in the model. But at other times it's useful to think of consuming as a different mode that has a beginning and end.

Consuming is usually either preceded or followed by navigation – so there are opportunities. But during a focused period of consumption you should make sure your navigation can fade into unconscious attention. Consider the controls of most software video players fading out as consumption begins. They can return during interaction with the interface.

Consider the seams where a user might switch mode into consumption and out of it. How do you support this switching? Similarly, are there ever legitimate reasons to interrupt the actor? How might you do that with skill?

Grazing

60:40
On the lookout for stuff.

Mid-way between consuming and a type of undirected browsing, grazing is consumption without the same levels of attention and commitment.

It's the 'smartly bored' state of someone passively monitoring a coarse aggregation of information. It could stretch to consider the consumption of a video playlist when you're not really paying attention – a sort of 'nihilistic nexting'.

It's a form of movement through content, rather the furniture of navigation. Grazing often doesn't have a goal, except to spend some time.

Grazing will (usually) only result in the discovery of unknown information – due to it being undirected. The actor may only dedicate passive attention during grazing, so barriers to differentiation and recognition should be lowered to support this behaviour. Grazing may result in some form of passive conditioning where a specific need develops and another behaviour begin.

Orienting

Structures imply a spatial aspect to designs and experiences. Orienting within a structure is necessary to move with confidence and intent. Orienting with see an actor locating themselves within a structure and/ or verifying their mental model of the structure.

Orienting is easiest in relatively stable and static structures. Traditionally navigation in the form of menus has clearly communicated a structure and the location of the actor relative to the structure. Breadcrumbs have also been used to help orient an actor and sometimes to describe their journey.

Orientation is like taking a breath in the flow of an experience. Sometimes engineering those moments is helpful. Showing the stages of a fixed static process – like a checkout – gives an actor confidence and predictability. Providing 'landmarks' within a structure can foster trust.

The ability to 'orient' is the biggest benefit of a well-architected system or service – it empowers the actor to make sense of wherever they are or find themselves. It enables task completion, sessions to be broken and returned to and the transition between different information seeking behaviours.

Flow and progress

There's a sweet spot between 'challenge' and 'motivation' where a user can feel as though they're performing with skill. For me this is the key differentiating factor between designing for Movement or Discovery.

Movement implies that an actor can judge their progress. Their motion through a structure gives them a sense of achievement as they move towards satisfying their need. Their behaviour has a pre-defined goal – occasionally vague or coarse, but nonetheless directed.

Discovery interrupts and surprises. The moment of identifying and satisfying an information need are close. It's harder to judge or recognise progress. So during exploring you must find other ways to motivate the actor.

Most digital products and services should be able to support both sets of behaviour. For users who want to "make progress", you must provide the ability to move with this intent. But it would be a poor world if there were no surprises. And you often need the ability to expand an actor's horizons through your own design and intention. Discovery does much better job of supporting 'unknown item' discovery – so it's an important set of behaviours to understand.

Browsing to navigating

Considering how and where to move actors between these sets is one reason for the model. Think about conversations where you discuss an actor moving from browsing to navigating and back again.

Sometimes I want to increase the ability of an actor to move through a structure with precision and efficiency. I want to foster a high degree of confidence. I want an actor to spend the majority of their time navigating. But at other times I may want to nudge a user from a navigating mindset to one of browsing. I may want to encourage more serendipitous discovery – more difficult during the tight focus expected during navigating. I may want to break their flow and focus to make it more likely to discover something new or unexpected.

By differentiating behaviours I can consider, "where are the opportunities to support switches in mode and behaviour?" Where are the opportunities in the behaviour sets to jump across into a different mode? In this example I may try to switch the actor back into that 'conditioning' mindset – so that their focus broadens.