Best of Ribbonfarm

A bunch of articles I think represent my best work

This trail changes as and when my own opinion of my posts changes. But generally stuff I am personally very happy with.

The Parrot

By: *Venkat* on *August 13, 2007*

This piece was written in Ithaca, in 2005, and is as accurate a phenomenological report of an actual mental response to real events as I am capable of. At the time I thought -- and still do -- that a very careful observation of your own thoughts as you react to sensory input is a very useful thing. Not quite meditation. Call it meditative observation. Stylistically, it is inspired by Camus.

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From my window table on the second floor of the coffee shop, looking down at the Commons - the determinedly medieval, pedestrians-only town square of Ithaca - I saw the parrot arrive. It was large and a slightly dirty white. Its owner carefully set a chair on top of a table and the parrot hopped from his finger onto the back of the chair and perched there comfortably. I suppose the owner wanted to keep it out of the reach of any dogs. He gave it a quick second glance, and stepped inside a restaurant. The parrot ruffled its feathers a bit, looked around, preened a little (showing off some unexpected pink plumage on the back of its neck, hidden in the dirty white), and then settled down

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The Ithaca Commons is a ring of shops and restaurants around an open courtyard, occupying the city block between Green and Seneca streets. The shops are an artfully arranged sequence of mildly unexpected experiences. Tacky used clothing and dollar stores sit next to upscale kitchen stores, craft shops, art galleries and expensive restaurants. The central promise of the Commons is that of the Spectacle. Street musicians, hippies meditatively kicking hackeysacks, the occasional juggler - they all make their appearance in the Commons. A visibly political Tibetan store and experiential restaurants such as the **Moosewood** and **Just a Taste** complete the tableau. The Commons is crafted for the

American liberal, a cocoon that gently reinforces her self-image as a more evolved, aware, and thoughtful creature than her parochial suburban, beer-guzzling, football-fan cousin.

But in any world, the presence of a large, dirty-white parrot is a definite **non sequitur**. Wall Street, Hollywood, sell-out Suburbia (and Exurbia), Southern Baptist congregations and the liberal Ithaca Commons, are all equally at a loss to accommodate the parrot. The grab-bag of varied oppressed Others that mill about University towns, I suspect, would also be at a loss to handle the parrot. Those of us who claim to be governed by eclectic, deeply considered and original world views - and I count myself among these - are also forced to admit that for all our treasured iconoclasm, we cannot accommodate the parrot. We are therefore forced, out of sheer necessity, to look at it.

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I am no deep observer of real life. When I work in public areas, it is for the steady supply of low-intensity human contact. The mass of unremarkable humanity does not register, except as a pleasant backdrop. Pretty girls, babies, dogs and notably ugly people do register, leaving a gentle and piquant trail of unexamined visual flavor. I am not a true people watcher.

I didn't quite know what to do with a parrot though, so I was forced to look at it. It triggered no runaway train of thought, so for a while it was just me and the parrot, separated by a pane of glass, and about fifty yards. The impression of "parrot," did not fade, get filtered away or get overwhelmed by free association. It lingered long enough that I began to watch. The parrot seemed happy. It sat there, awake, but not alert or wary. It looked straight ahead. Presumably it did not find the scene interesting enough to strain its neck.

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I wonder how Hegel would have reacted to the parrot. Would it have triggered, through some improbable sequence of dominoes, a fresh insight concerning the Self and the Other? Would he have gazed inattentively at the parrot and chased gleefully after some new thought ("birdâ€¦ freedom â€¦")? Would it be just another little nudge powering the inexorable progress of his snowballing philosophy of everything? Would it occur to him that whatever lofty abstractions it triggered, the parrot **qua** parrot would not make an appearance in the edifice he was building? Sadly, I must suspect that the thought would not have occurred to him.

To be fair, I must also suspect that the existentialists would have done no better, despite their protestations to the contrary. I must conclude that Camus would have looked at the parrot and instantly exulted, "There it is, the Absurd manifest!" The parrot would again have been lost, subsumed here by the Absurd. As far as the parrot is concerned, Camus and Hegel differ little.

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The parrot, without its owner, was sitting there, **qua** parrot, indifferent to its impact on passersby. Most people looked at it. Some did a double take. One man stopped, turned to face it squarely and stared at it for a minute, as if waiting for it to acquire some significance. A decrepit old man in a wheelchair rolled by, glancing at it with a painfully slow motion,

before letting his head sink again to his chest, weighed down, I suppose, by illness and unseen burdens. A black mother, pushing a stroller, walked by, glancing at the parrot without interest. I wonder why **black** registered.

A pretty girl in faded red pants stepped out of a shop, talking on a cell phone. She took in the parrot in the absent-mindedly, absorbed several network hops away. She exited my field of vision, stage right, but returned a few minutes later. This time she stopped and genuinely stared at the parrot before heading back into a shop.

A hippie, dread-locked and tie-dyed, stopped and grinned delightedly at it. There was no discernible transition from "see" to "grin," and something about that bothered me. There was something scripted about the response; her engagement of the parrot was not authentic.

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You know you have are a slave to the life of the mind if a phrase like "her engagement of the parrot was not authentic" crosses your mind quite naturally, and it takes you more than a minute to laugh.

But consider what it means if your response to the parrot is measured, seemingly scripted, or otherwise deliberate in any way. A mind with 'parrot' on it should not look like anything recognizable. A frown might mean you are trying to rapidly assimilate the parrot - but in that case, the process of assimilation, rather than the parrot itself, must be occupying your mind. You cannot, at the same time, think "parrot" and engage in the task of wrapping up the parrot in a bundle of associations and channeling it to the right areas of long-term memory. The hippie's grin is equally symptomatic of a non-parrot awareness. The hippie is probably self-indulgently enjoying a validated feeling of "one must be one with nature" or something along those lines.

So an authentic engagement of the parrot must have an element of the unscripted in it. It can neither be deliberative, nor reactive. Furious and active thinking will not do. Nor the "Awww!" you might direct at a puppy. A puppy is a punch you can roll with.

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Two moms with three babies wandered onto the scene. It being a nice day, the babies were visible, one squirming in the arms of its mother and the others poking their snouts out of the stroller. The mom carrying the baby stopped immediately upon spotting the parrot and approached it (she was the first to do so). As is the wont of moms, she immediately began trying to direct her infant's attention to the parrot, shoving its face within a foot of the parrot. Mothers are too engaged in scripting the experiences of their babies to experience anything other than the baby themselves. The parrot obliged with a display of orange (I suspect it was stretching, disturbed from its contemplative reverie). The baby, however, seemed entirely uninterested in the parrot. Perhaps the parrot was unclear to its myopic eyes, or perhaps it was simply no more worthy of note than any of other exciting blobs of visual experience all around. At any rate, the mom stopped trying after a few moments, and the five of them rolled on.

The pretty girl in faded red pants was back. This time, she had two waitress friends along, and took a picture of the parrot with her cell phone. The three girls (the other two were rather dumpy looking, but I suppose it was the aprons) chattered for a bit and then stared at the

parrot some more. Two more pretty girls walked past, and though the parrot clearly registered, walked past without a perceptible turning of their heads. Something about that worried me. They were of the indistinguishable dressed-in-season species of young college girl that swarm all over American university towns. These could have been either Ithaca College or Cornell; I can't tell them apart. Two more of the breed walked by, again with the same non-reaction.

A black-guy-white-girl couple walked by. The girl turned to look at the bird as they walked past, while the guy looked at it very briefly. Shortly after, an absorbed black teenager walked by. She looked at it as she walked past, with no change in her expression. The parrot was clearly on Track Two. Track One continued thinking about whatever it was she was thinking about. I suppose 'parrot' might have consciously registered with her a few minutes later, but she did not walk by again. Something about black responses to the parrot was sticking in my mind. The owner came back out of the store, carrying a cup of coffee.

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Now, a parrot is not an arresting sort of bird. It does not have the ostentation of the peacock, the imposing presence of the ostrich or the latent lethality of a falcon or hawk. Even in context, at a zoo, a typical white parrot is not remarkable in the company of its more gaudy relatives. Any of these more dramatic creatures would, I suppose, instantly draw a big gawking crowd, perhaps even calls to the police. Undivided attention, active curiosity and action would certainly be merited ("try to feed him some of your bagel").

The parrot though, had neither the domesticated presence of a dog, nor the demanding presence of a truly unexpected creature. A dog elicits smiles, pats or studied avoidance, while an ostrich would certainly call for a cascade of conversation into activity, culminating in the arrival of a legitimate authority (though, I suppose, most communities would be hard pressed to generate a legitimate response to an ostrich. Cornell though, is an agricultural university, so I suppose eventually one of the many animal experts would arrive on the scene).

So a dog elicits a conventional ripple of cognitive activity as it progresses through the town square, soon displaced by other preoccupations. An ostrich presumably triggers a flurry deliberation, followed by actual activity. So what does the parrot cause, living as it does in the twilight zone between conventionally expected and actionably unexpected? You cannot have the comfort of either action or practiced thoughts, with a parrot in your field of view. Yet, the parrot is not a threat, so you clearly cannot panic or be overwhelmed. The parrot, I think lives in the realm of pure contemplation. The parrot is rare in adult life. For the child, everything is a parrot.

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The return of the owner annoyed me briefly. With his return, the **non sequitur** instantly became an instance of the signature of the Commons: a spectacle. The owner was clearly used to handling his parrot. He had it hop on his hand again and swung it up and down. The parrot spread its wings and did various interesting things with its feathers which I do not have the vocabulary to describe. With the owner, the context of a small bubble-zoo had arrived. The owner chatted with the girl in faded red pants, who had come out again. Fewer adults stared. The ensemble was now clearly within the realm of the expected. Most people walked on without a glance, while some, emboldened by the new legitimacy of the situation,

stopped and watched with interest. The owner tired of active display and set the parrot back on its perch, and turned his attention to the girl.

For a minute, I was sorry, but then a girl, about six years old, walked by with her mother. It was a classic little girl, in orange pants and ice cream cone. She stopped and stared at the bird very carefully. It was not a curious probing look, or the purposeful look that kids sometimes get when they are looking about for a way to play with a new object. This little girl did not look like she would be going home and looking up parrots on the Discovery channel website. She did not look like she was gathering up courage to pet it or imagining it in the role of a chase-able dog or cat. She was just looking at it. Clearly her powers of abstraction had yet to mature to the point where she could see the bubble circus.

A pair of middle-aged women stopped by the parrot. After an initial look at the parrot, they turned and started chatting with the owner. I expect the conversation began, "Does he talk?" or "Doesn't he fly away?" Shortly after, I saw them wander off a little to the side, where there was a fountain. One woman took a picture of the other, standing next to the fountain, with a disposable camera. Local resident showing visiting Cousin Amy the town, I guessed. All is legitimate on a vacation, including a parrot.

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I don't think children are necessarily curious when presented with a new experience. The little girl presented a clearer display of authentic engagement of the parrot than all the adults. It was what I have been describing all along as a stare. But stare doesn't quite cover it. "Stare" does not have the implicit cognitive content of the hippy's "grin." Happy, bemused, smiling, frowning, eager curiosity - these are visible manifestations of minds occupied by the workings of deliberative or reactive responses to the parrot. **Parrot** flits too quickly the face to be noticed, and is replaced by more normal cognitions.

So, here is a question: what is the expression on the face of a person who has authentically engaged a parrot? I must propose, in all seriousness, the ridiculous answer, "it looks like the face of a person who has seen a parrot."

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The people talking to the owner had left. He now sat reading a book, while the parrot ate seeds of some sort off the table. Three teenage skateboarders wandered to a spot about a dozen yards away. One of them nudged the others and pointed to the parrot. They looked at it in appreciation. It wasn't quite clear what they were appreciating, but they clearly approved of the parrot. That made me happy.

Now, a large brood of little black children came by, herded by two young women who might have been nannies, I suppose. The black kids all stopped and stared intently at the parrot. The nannies chatted with the owner, who looked on approvingly at the children while he talked. The conversation looked left-brained from fifty feet away. Some tentative petting ensued. As the nannies led the children away, after allowing them a decent amount of time to engage the parrot, one little boy had to be dragged away; he managed to turn his head full circle, Exorcist style, to look at the bird.

Now, five young black men, perhaps eighteen to twenty, walked by. Theirs was clearly a presence to rival that of the parrot-owner duo as a spectacle. Their carefully layered

oversized sports clothes and reversed baseball hats demanded attention. I suppose spectacles, be they man-parrots or a group of swaggering young black men, do not supply attention, but demand it. But you cannot really compete with a parrot. The parrot is entirely unaware that it is competing. The black group almost rolled past, but suddenly one of them stopped and turned around to look at the parrot. He looked like he'd suddenly reconsidered the studied indifference that I suppose was his response to competing spectacles. A visible recalibration of response played across his face, and suddenly, he was authentically engaging the parrot in a demanding, direct way. The other stopped and looked to. The first man then pulled out his cell phone, still staring at the parrot, and took a picture. He then briefly interrogated the owner about the parrot, and the group rolled on.

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I wonder now, why are black responses to the parrot more noteworthy than generic white responses? And while I mull that, why have the responses of one other group - pretty young girls - stuck in my mind (besides the fact that I notice them more)?

Now, for an authentic engagement of the parrot, there must be parrot on your mind. Your face must look like the face of a person who has seen a parrot. This is not an ambiguous face, or a face marked visibly by the presence of other thoughts or a subtext. A parrot-mind may wrestle briefly with cell phone mind or preoccupied-with-race-and-oppression mind, but the outcome is all or nothing. There is no useful way a constantly active subtext of race can inform your engagement of a parrot.

I suppose I was looking for evidence that there is room in the black mind for at least a small period of unambiguous engagement with the parrot. If your preoccupation with race and injustice occupies you so completely that even the parrot cannot dislodge it, then it must be a sad life. In a very real sense, your mind is not free, and therefore neither are you, if there is not even temporary room for the parrot. The parrot can only occupy a free mind. To my list of profundities, I will add the following: a free mind is one which the parrot can occupy easily, and stay in as long as it chooses.

Now, the little black children engaged the parrot as completely as the little white girl. So if the little kids are born free and demonstrably remain free until at least age six, as demonstrated by the parrot, why and when do they choose to give away their freedom to a pre-occupation with the subtext of race, which makes those happy six-year-old faces sad? Or is it that the mist of preoccupation descends on them, whether they want it or not?

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I suppose enough actual watching eventually teaches you to observe better. It suddenly occurred to me that the neck-language of parrot-engagement said a lot.

The clearest response is the snap, or double-take. It signals computation. A slight glance on the other hand, no different from the casual scanning of everyday scenery, with no special attention, must mean filtering. I refuse to believe that everybody has a nontrivial scripted response to parrot, so it must mean that the scripted response simply treats the parrot as noise to be filtered. In the casual glance, there is no parrot on the mind.

Now, a more complex response, one signalled by a snap, is one where there is a perceptible pause or break in stride, followed by a turning away. That is a response that is looking for

an explanation. The sort of response that might be hooked by a lone parrot, but would ignore the contextually appropriate owned parrot. Most of the time, when we look for an explanation, we can only see an explanation. Sometimes, when the mind hiccups on the path to the explanation, we see the parrot.

Viktor Frankl said, "between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." Self-improvement gurus like to use that quote to preach, but to me, it seems that this space is primarily interesting because the parrot can live there for a bit, so your mind can be parrot for a bit.

You might hesitate and never visit that space. You might react so fast you leave the space before it registers on your awareness. Or you might dwell there awhile.

An MBA in Gordon's Restaurant

By: *Venkat* on *October 25, 2007*

Today, on October 25th, 2007, I make a prediction. There will be a bestselling business management book written in the next two years with the kitchen or restaurant as its primary metaphor, and it will prominently feature Chef Gordon Ramsey. Not primarily because he is an amazing model of a philosopher-warrior-businessman-artist, but because the kitchen, not the battlefield, is the metaphor for business in the 21st century. I might even write the book myself. Here is my first stake in the ground. You've probably seen books like the The 10-day MBA and the The 12-Hour MBA Program. Here I channel Ramsey and offer you the 60-minute MBA.

Gordon Ramsey is the ace chef behind the fabulous show, Kitchen Nightmares, in which he essentially turns around failing restaurants within a week, with a stiff dose of foul-mouthed intervention, an injection of raw cash, and raw reality. In the brutal restaurant business, which draws the most starry-eyed entrepreneurs, of whom 9 out of 10 fail, business lessons are illustrated graphically within a microcosm where everything is literally visible. Things that are intangible in other domains are completely manifest. What makes the show beautiful is that it is palpably **real** reality television, about real people doing real things. It isn't about tribes playing contrived games in a contrived social system with arbitrary incentives.

Sure -- let's be a little skeptical. They probably don't air the episodes about unsuccessful stabs by Ramsey, but his successes teach you a whole lot. Here is a summary of the episodes I've watched so far (follow links for a precis of each):

In Episode 1, Ramsey turns around Peter's Restaurant in Long Island, a faltering Italian joint with a volatile dimwit son-of-the-founder as manager, by finally getting the dimwit clued-in about how to take responsibility for, and run the place.
In Episode 2, Ramsey turns around Dillon's, a schizophrenic joint in the heart of Manhattan that doesn't know whether it is Indian or American, with the critical move being the firing (real, as far as I could tell, unlike the television firings by Trump) of the incompetent manager who rode the good faith of the timid owner.
In Episode 3, Ramsey turns around The Mixing Bowl, an outfit with no clear failure mode, but an overall dysfunctional team with flaws all around, by just expanding their imaginations, and getting each of them to face reality and step up to accept their responsibility.
In Episode 4, possibly the most dramatic of all, a tyrannical chef and an indifferent **sous**

chef running a disgusting place called **Seascape** get the full-blown Ramsey treatment**.** The turnaround requires firing both, before renewal can begin.

To earn your 60-minute MBA, you have to read all four stories, with the critical eye of a **Harvard Business Review** reader. Now let's extract some lessons, and translate them to a general business context. Each of these features occurred in all the stories, and I believe they are necessary, if not sufficient.

Diagnosis: In each case, Ramsey looks at four features/symptoms to assess a place: quality of food, ambiance of dining area, team chemistry and kitchen cleanliness. In each case, ALL four were badly off. **Translation: check product/service quality, customer experience, people problems, and level of organizational decay.**

Pre-Op: In each case, significant money was spent either cleaning up or repairing the infrastructure. From a thorough steam cleaning to get rid of mold, to wholesale replacements of all kitchen equipment, getting the outfit ready for success and a pleasure to work in was the key first step. In each case, just the preparation alone achieved a miraculous morale boost. **Translation: don't attempt surgery without preparation.**

The Cure: In each Ramsey followed a particular strategic sequence to turn things around:

First, he refused to budge until absolute cleanliness and adequacy of equipment was achieved. **Translation: create the most basic material and environmental conditions for successful day-to-day work.**

Second, he identified toxic (or merely miscast) problem individuals and drove all around consensus about what/who the problem was by shoving everybody's faces in reality, rather than trying to win arguments about who was right or wrong. Memorably, in the **Seascape** episode, he forced the chef to recognize that the food he thought was great was actually crappy, by engineering an unambiguous taste test. The chef was so far in denial that he refused to taste Ramsey's dish. **Translation: get everybody to stare reality in the face.**

Third, he gave everybody a chance to redeem themselves, and find the right roles for themselves, but if they didn't step up, he did not hesitate to force the hard decisions. In the Peter's example, the volatile dimwit underwent a miraculous transformation and found a way to become part of the solution. In the Dillon's and Seascape cases though, it was **shape up or ship out,** and people got fired. **Translation: be absolutely fair in making people decisions, but make hard-nosed business decisions if necessary.**

Fourth, he drove change from the brand inward, rather than from strategy outward. In each case, a minor or major rebranding was necessary, with an absolute makeover of the offerings, restaurant interior, and in the case of Dillon's, even a name change. **Translation: re-imagine the new form of your organization from the customer's point of view, and then make that happen.**

Fifth, he **showed** people how to do their jobs if they were otherwise the right people, but simply lacked the training. In one case, he brought in a consultant chef. In another case, he had his own **maitre'd** demonstrate how to run the dining area to the bumbling manager. **Translation: there are always talented, well-intentioned people who just need a little coaching. Get them to be your solution.**

Sixth, he got the staff to experience success, and get high on it by creating a critical success experiment. In each case, the restaurant shut down and relaunched with some major hoopla. In each case, the staff struggled and in parts, crumbled, dealing with the onslaught of customers pouring in. In each case, this remark was made: "this staff doesn't know what it is like to be busy." In each case operational inefficiencies were immediately exposed and corrected in war mode. **Translation: Get people to experience what success feels like, even if only for a day.**

Seventh, he left after making sure the right management team was in place and able to sustain the changed direction. In one case that meant the consultant chef becoming an

ongoing consultant. In other cases, it meant hard conversations with the business owner about what they needed to do. **Translation: without serious succession planning, everything else is just noise.**

Now of course, not all of the lessons scale to, say, a large Fortune 500 company. You will not always have a supply of cash to completely rebuild your factories in the most modern way. But cleanliness, fresh paint and coffee are achievable by any organization. There were also other moves that were not as universal, but rather unique to each situation. In one hilarious instance, he got a wimpy manager to grow a backbone by sparring with him in the boxing ring (Ramsey apparently grew up in tough/poor conditions and started life as a soccer player before turning to cooking).

Why Restaurants Work as Models

We've seen centuries of management thinking driven, essentially, by military thinking and abstract microeconomics. The restaurant works as a great laboratory for a new approach to management for one key reason: it is not so small a domain that the dynamics of effective decision-making and work are invisible (example, writing a book -- staring at a typing novelist teaches you very little about solving interpersonal conflicts, even if there are equivalents going on inside the novelist's head). At the same time, the case studies are not embedded in domains far too vast to easily visualize, like say IBM.

But most importantly, unlike a battlefield, where nobody ever really wins, and a lot of people die, in a kitchen, if things are right, beautiful value that we can all appreciate, is created: delicious food. Business is fundamentally a creative, generative enterprise, even if its fundamental mechanism is the churn of creative destruction.

But beyond these "just the right size" and "generative" aspects, a restaurant also exhibits all the key phenomenology of any business, at the right scale and proportion, in very visible ways. All features of a good living textbook. There is a supply chain, a product/service mix, elements of vision, innovation, production, operations, sales, marketing -- they're all there. There are morale issues, talent issues, alignment issues -- anything you care to name. Features of an enterprise that might be invisible in large organizations (like toxic people systems) are visible under the full glare of all-face-to-face conversations (no wars being fought invisibly over email -- imagine a CEO yelling at a COO across a room containing all customers). Finally, the logic of dramatic moves, such as massive layoffs, key hirings and firings, rebrandings and repositioning, are all illustrated in beautifully visible ways.

I will be buying the boxed set of the DVDs when they come out.

If somebody wants to offer me the deal to write the Gordon Ramsey MBA book, I am up for it.

Marketing, Innovation and the Creation of Customers

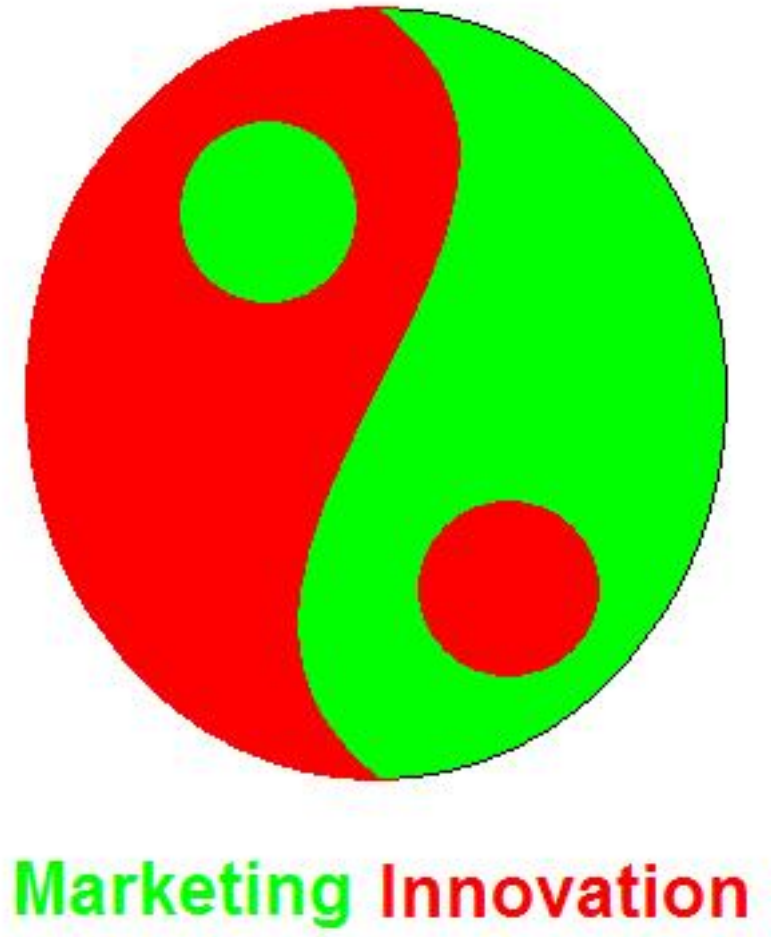
By: *Venkat* on *June 15, 2009*

Recently, one of my projects went through a rapid, but nearly imperceptible phase change. It went from being an "innovation-first" project to being a "marketing-first" project. The marketing hat feels at once comfortable and uncomfortable, familiar and unfamiliar. It feels

like listening to unfamiliar lyrics set to a familiar tunes. This disconcerting feeling of being caught up in the dance of a yin-yang pair has had me pondering the best-known Drucker quote (from The Essential Drucker) for weeks now:

"Because the purpose of business is to create a customer, the business enterprise has two-and only two-basic functions: marketing and innovation."

Marketing and innovation define each other in yin-yang ways. Thinking about the fundamentals of this dual pair of concepts led me to a curious definitionÂ of the most important word in business: **customer**.



The Yin-Yang Evidence

Let me first treat you to two lists of weird symmetries and similarities between marketing and innovation, in the Lincoln-Kennedy-assassination similarities mode. I want to convince you there is a pattern here and, unlike the Lincoln-Kennedy stuff, that there is a reason for the pattern. Let's start with the similarities, and then look at the polarities.

Similarities

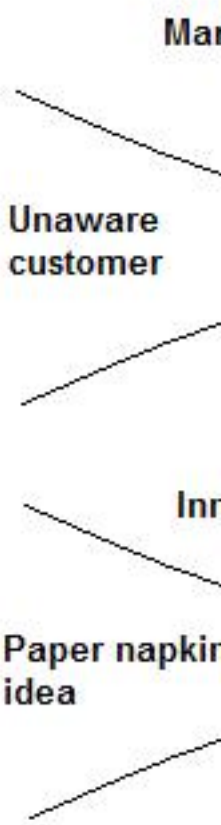
Both functions are systematically misunderstood, compared to other business functions. Innovation is often reductively understood as "invention and R&D," while marketing is

often reductively understood as "promotion and advertising." By contrast, nobody seriously misunderstands what HR, accounting or manufacturing are about.

Ideally, both are in a balance: the optimal ratio of marketing spend to engineering spend in a product launch (known as the Grabowski Ratio) is 1.

Both functions lay claim to the DNA of the organization. Marketing owns the overt form, the brand, that integrates the self-image and story of the company, while innovation owns the individuation behind the brand, within the society of corporations.

Both functions frame their basic processes in terms of an "increasing certainty" funnel metaphor. In innovation, the funnel narrows from basic R&D through various stage gates to "successful commercialized product/service" while in marketing, the funnel narrows from a customer who is unaware of your offering, through stages of awareness, interest, purchase, repeat purchase and the ultimate stage, "loyalty." In both cases, the fundamental dynamic is a weeding out, a filtration. Of ideas in one case, of people in the other



Both functions are numbers games **by definition**. You try to factor in all the information you have, and are still left with a situation of incomplete information, at which point you have to make a leap of faith and push a button. The prototype either flies, or it does not. The customer either pays attention, or s/he does not. By contrast, every other function in business can reach much higher levels of certainty.

Both functions revolve around the concept of differentiation. Innovators deal in differentiation in product/service features, while marketers deal in differentiation in customer perceptions.

A notion of creativity is at the heart of both functions. The idea that it is easier to invent the future than to predict it applies to both marketing and innovation. Innovators seek to shape future material realities. Marketers seek to shape perceptions.

Both have a love/hate relationship with a downstream partner function (production and sales respectively) that deals in scale and repetition. One design, a production run of a

thousand. One user-story, a thousand registered users. One advertisement, a thousand sales calls. Even in the age of mass customization, you can always tell the two sides apart. Production and sales are always repeating **something** (indeed, their **raison d'etre** is skill in creating perfect repetitions efficiently, even if the repetition is at a level of abstraction above "mass customization"). Marketing and innovation, on the other hand, depend on novelty and uniqueness to add value. This is necessary. If innovation and marketing did not create repetition opportunities downstream, you would not have a business. You'd have a one-off project.

There's a lot more that I am sure you can dream up. But let's look at some polarities.

Polarities

The stereotype of the innovator is the unsociable recluse, hiding unkempt in a lab. The stereotype of the marketer is the uber-sociable, immaculately turned-out social sophisticate. Both groups are known for extreme precision in their use of language, but in one case it leads to discourses impenetrable to others, while in the other, it leads to models of clarity, brevity and comprehensibility.

Marketing and innovation play a zero-sum game driven by the clarity of the "customer." When the "customer" has been created with great clarity, marketing leads innovation and you get sustaining and/or incremental innovations. When the customer is a mystery, innovation leads, and you get disruptive and/or radical innovations (here's what those adjectives mean, if you don't know).

Though the ideal balance of marketing to engineering spend may be 1, this is a dynamic balance. In general, you can cannot be doing both at once. The two have to dance, creating a conversation.

There seem to be fewer polarities than similarities. We'll ponder that another day. Right now, let's move on to the theory that can elevate this above Lincoln-Kennedy level.

The Creation of the Customer

To understand this yin-yang stuff, we have to tease out the substance behind the "create a customer" bit from Drucker's famous quote. What exactly is this deified construct known as the "customer?" Why do we speak in terms of reverential awe? Why do we impute Godly attributes to this creature (**omniscience**: "the customer is always right," **omnipotence**: "the customer will ultimately decide.")? Why does this creator-like creature need to be created rather than discovered? You and I are customers, and I don't exactly feel Godly when deigning to buy socks at the store. Rather small, controlled, overwhelmed by choices and intimidated actually.

That's because a customer isn't a human being. Repeat after me:

A customer is a novel and stable pattern of human behavior.

You shouldn't be surprised. What, after all, are user stories (innovation) and psychographic profiles (marketing) but hypotheses about the stability of human behavior patterns? Underneath humanistic rhetoric about authenticity, the creation of a customer is an act of control.

A beautiful example of this principle can be found on the streets of Bombay, where vendors will offer to sell you "time pass." Time-pass, as it happens, is a paper cone of roasted and

salted peanuts. But you don't buy peanuts. You don't even buy a snack. The branding as "time pass" tells you what you buy: a way to pass the time as you stroll along on the beach, or wait for your train to arrive. The customer created by the innovation (peanuts in paper cones made available at certain locations) is the **pattern of modification of waiting and relaxation behaviors**. You used to stroll. Now you stroll munching peanuts. You used to fret, looking at your watch, cursing railway delays. Now you peacefully munch peanuts instead.

This explains why customers need to be created, and what innovations **really** are. Innovation isn't about creating novel products or services.

An innovation is a stimulus that causes a novel and stable pattern of human behavior to emerge.

Google isn't fundamentally an innovative search engine. It is a stimulus that creates a novel pattern of information-discovery behavior known as "Googling" that is different from what "searching" used to be before Google. Cars aren't products that replace horses. They are novel patterns of human movement and settlement.

That then is at why marketing and innovation are deeply linked in a yin-yang pattern. They are both exploring the same uncertainties in free human behavior, and seeking ways to stabilize it into predictable patterns. When both look at uncertainties in human behavior, or uncertainties in potential stimuli, you get similarities and harmonies. When they are looking in different directions (typically, marketing looking at the customer, while innovation is looking at the stimulus), you get polarities. This tension is necessary. If ever innovation became truly "customer-led" you'll be in a universe of faster horses. If ever marketing becomes truly "product-led," you'll be in a universe of stuff nobody will buy.

The Death of the Customer

This definition of a customer also explains the life cycle of a product. With every enhancement of the stimulus, the pattern that is the customer evolves and becomes more complex. At some point though, there is no more novelty emerging in the pattern. The customer is rather predictably asking for a faster horse, and it is costing you a lot more to add every extra bit of speed to your horses. At this point, you either have to look for less mature patterns on the periphery (disruption-ready categories) or look for new base patterns. The category is dead from the point of view of innovation and marketing. The product/service is end-of-life, and more importantly, the "customer" is end-of-life. The pattern cannot sustain itself. You put both in a hospice, and harvest residual value.

The Founding Fathers of Technology

By: *Venkat* on *March 27, 2008*

I want to propose to you a powerful way of looking at technology. The plural form of the word, **technologies,** is becoming meaningless. There is only one globe-spanning beast, comprising vast systems of engineering design, production and operations, held together by a web of standards, and a central nervous system called 'the Internet' (ever wonder why we use the definite article?) This beast is what answers to the singular noun 'technology.' I started exploring this idea in a comic book format recently, in my story Mousetrap 2.0. With Nicholas Carr's Big Switch, the idea seems set for the big time. In this post I want to

introduce you to four of my favorite scientist-engineers, who conceived and enabled the creation of this beast in the short span of 50 years between the end of World War II and the turn of the century. Reading from left to right below, these are: Claude Shannon, Vannevar Bush, Norbert Wiener and Herbert Simon.

Arguably, these four gentlemen (all dead white males, sorry postmodernists) created the beast of technology as we know it. Von Neumann almost made 'founder' status, but why he fell short is a story for another blog post. Of course this is a reductive model of history, and hundreds of thousands of people labored to create the technological world as we know it, but history as fast-scrolling movie credits is not interesting.

There are also more common ways of telling this story, but I argue that mine is better than the joke that Al Gore invented the Internet (the core integrative element of technology in the

singular), and it is not quite as weak as a story that backtracks way too much and attempts to attribute everything to Aristotle and the Chinese. So I offer this quartet of founding fathers as my single best proximal-people-cause explanation of how the world as we know it came about. Call it a rhetorical origin myth to provoke debate. Consider the contributions each of these four made towards cocooning our world in a single web of technology (and no, it is no accident that all four are American).

(by the way, please welcome to ribbonfarm, illustrator Yurij Alexander, responsible for these great portraits!)

Claude Shannon

Claude Shannon is important for one simple reason: he provided the single most important idea we need to view technology as a unified entity: information theory. It was a close call between Shannon and Turing (for the Universal Turing Machine), but in my mind, information theory wins by a whisker as the more fundamental idea, primarily due to the deep connections it achieves between discrete mathematics on the one hand, and statistical physics, entropy and the material world on the other. Turing's idea would have to wait for Landaeur's theorem to acquire an equally fundamental grounding in material reality.

Vannevar Bush is probably the most important engineer-scientist lay people have not heard of. What did he do, you ask? He was a founder of not one but **two** fields that dominated the technology of the second half of the 21st century: computer science and control theory. He also invented the modern American model of research, including the model for agencies like DARPA, and via a clever accounting idea called indirect cost support, the modern American research university. And oh yeah, he wrote that seminal bit of 1945 visioning, **As We May Think,** which introduced a little idea called the Memex. The Memex went to inspire three generations of technologists to invent, respectively, the fundamental architecture of the Internet (incidentally enabled by the agency he helped create, DARPA), the World Wide Web and the concept of wikis. And I am not making this up -- the people behind these technologies (J. C. R. Licklider, Robert Taylor, Tim Berners-Lee and Ward Cunningham) all acknowledge Bush as a (if not **the**) inspiration for their work. Another tidbit: Bush's student Jay Forrester went on to found the modern field of system dynamics, the application of control theory (and more) to modeling everything from cities and corporations to the whole darn world. One more: another student, Fredrick Terman, helped create Silicon Valley as we know it. To my knowledge V. Bush is unrelated to the G. W. Bush clan. The phenomenal impact of Bush can probably never be fully estimated.

Norbert Wiener

Norbert Wiener, also a founder of control theory and computing, and a contemporary and collaborator of Bush, thought rather more of himself than an objective historian would, but you have to give it to him. To write, in 1948, a prescient and courageous grand synthesis of control, computing and communication (I refer here to **Cybernetics** of course) was a striking act of imagination. The book is startling in that it leaps back and forth from detailed mathematics to metaphor and history. And the guy wasn't all visionary -- he was a formidable mathematician, and in many ways the stuff he did in control theory was so advanced (in areas like nonlinear and stochastic control) that it took the field decades of slogging through linear noiseless system-theoretic ideas before it could really pay serious attention to Wiener's work. But Wiener is probably most important for getting us **think** of technology as a connected, organic whole. Though is book had less real impact than Bush's more quiet work, I argue that it helped create a scientific-technological culture that would head inevitably towards greater and greater technological integration.

Herbert Simon

The last of the quartet, Herbert Simon, has two claims to fame: as a founding father of Artificial Intelligence, and as the first engineer/scientist to really attempt to bridge the worlds of technology and economics by paying attention to the problem of bounded rationality. But really, he cemented his place in this set due to one important contribution: the book **The Sciences of the Artificial,** which challenged us to think of the artificial landscape created by technology with the same sort of stance with which we view the natural world. Without Simon's efforts, it would have taken us much longer to think of technology as more than applied science, and as a socio-economic entity.

Further Reading

You can explore more of the history behind these four people and their ideas via these books.

The Mathematical Theory of Communication by Shannon is surprisingly readable despite the enormity of the idea it introduced. You'll even understand a fair bit without mathematics, thanks to the smart examples. The edition I've linked to has a nice introduction too, by Weaver.
Science--the endless frontier: A report to the President on a program for postwar scientific research is the most quoted Bush reference, but the Atlantic article linked to earlier is

probably a good enough exposure to his ideas.
From Memex To Hypertext is a relatively recent academic collection that is well worth looking at. It traces the continuing impact of Bush's ideas, and has lately been driving some of my own research.
Cybernetics, Second Edition: or the Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine is the book that made Wiener famous. A little turgid and hard to read, but worth the effort. Will give you a serious appreciation for history and what the world was like in the 1940s when these ideas germinated.
The Sciences of the Artificial - 3rd Edition, again a book that rewards study. Somewhat sloppily written and argued (paradoxically by the guy who taught computers logic), but again, as with all these references, the key is to read it as a history book, not as a technology book.
Between Human and Machine: Feedback, Control, and Computing before Cybernetics (Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology) the single most impressive piece of technology history I've ever read. Carefully, but humanely deconstructs the origin myths of the fields of control and communication, gently humanizes Wiener without taking him at his own estimation, and paints a brilliant portrait of the forces that came together to create the first signs of a connected world.
The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google, which I previously reviewed, should give you a very modern look at technology in the singular.

I'll be talking a lot more about this theme in future posts, so there are more references to share, but if this thread of thinking interests you, this starter set is all must-reads. No serious technologist should go without at least a passing familiarity with these founding fathers, their work and the historical context within which they created our world.

The 15 Laws of Meeting Power

By: *Venkat* on *July 14, 2007*

We humans are simpler in collectives than we are as individuals. We **like** to think there is a "whole greater than the sum of the parts" dynamic to human collectives, but there really isn't. The larger the meeting, the dumber it is. If you find a large deliberative body that is acting in ways that are smarter than its size should permit, you can be sure its workings are being subverted by, say, Karl Rove. I'll argue that larger thesis in a future article, but for now, I'll just use that element of my personal doctrine to explain why I've been fascinated by meetings for years -- they are simpler to study, understand and influence than individuals (in particular that most stubborn individual, yourself). When introspection gets to be too tiring, I turn to thinking about groups.

I first began collecting notes on meetings when I was working on coordination problems in multiagent systems. All that brooding about the shockingly dumb models of intentional agents (a class that includes "humans") used by economists, engineers and computer scientists began to bleed into real life, and I began thinking of humans in unforgivably simplistic and reductive ways. My main excuse is that it works (except in one-to one interactions, where humans suddenly start displaying the full complexity attributed to them, and you have to go all Freud to have a successful complex conversation).
At the time, I was living at the University of Michigan Telluride House, which required me to attend weekly meetings run according to Robert's Rules. Besides that, of course, there were the usual seminars and meetings with advisors that are the graduate student's lot. Since then, I have attended far too many meetings of various sorts (lately, it's been an immersion course in corporate meetings), and while not all meetings are as simple as those bound by

Robert's Rules, the same simple heuristics seem to work pretty well in all situations.

Here are the 15 "rules of power" I've picked up and validated over the years. All amoral, none absolute. Use with taste and integrity. Keep counterexamples in mind.

1. The Power Of The Obvious

A pervasive myth about meetings is that there is always one garrulous idiot who says all the obvious things and wastes everybody's time. Yes, every garrulous idiot says a lot of obvious things, but not everybody who says a lot of obvious things is an idiot. When I was younger, I was drawn to the mystique of the 'silent genius' ideal - the guy who sits in the back row and makes one penetrating comment that clarifies everything at the end of the meeting, after the garrulous have finished making fools of themselves. But the person who dominates the airwaves with apparently obvious, even trite comments can also have the most influence. Why?

They get to decide how to **frame** the obvious - introduce key metaphors and determine the degree of dichotomization for example, that dictates how the discussion will flow.
They gatekeep the ideas that are in the collective space, what philosophers of language call **common ground** and computer scientists call **common knowledge,** distinct from **mutual belief.**

The talkers are almost always underestimated - since they say so much, it is easy to discount the cumulative effect of all the things they say (or choose not to). From reinforcement and subliminal messages to under-the-radar introduction of themes piecemeal, you can do a lot if you are aware of this power.

2. The Power Of Polarization

The collective mind is more likely to find itself in a polarized state than an individual mind. A skill to recognize, and occasionally use, is the power of occupying one of the extremes of a polarized situation. In 1956 George Miller, in the seminal paper "The Magic Number 7" demonstrated that an individual holds at most about 7 unrelated concepts in short-term memory. In my experience, a meeting of more than 3 people holds at most 3-4 ideas at once in its collective head during a meeting. Usually the comfort level is 2. This is why polarization is such a common condition in debate, and so hard to break out of. It takes a huge amount of work to keep more than two things alive in collective consciousness. This means that there is a lot of power to be found in the **choice** of what dichotomies/polarizations to encourage in a debate. The dumb meeting participant whines that things are being oversimplified and strives hopelessly to add nuance and multiple perspectives. The smart meeting participant accepts that polarized discussions are a necessary consequence of group dynamics, and strives to ensure that the dichotomy (or non-dichotomous pair of thoughts) that dominates the discourse is one that will further his goals. This means occasionally being an extremist who presses for black/white frames.

At first sight, this might seem to be a less useful position than the position of the saint who "sees both sides" and plays peacemaker. The extremist is committed to a constrained position, cannot move too much and, to naÃ¯ve listeners, is being an unreasonable spoilsport. But remember again, through your aggression, you have more control over the situation (so long as your intransigence is a tactical choice rather than a mental block) than the peaceniks, synthesizers and wannabe umpires, who must react to your actions. If you bring enough energy to your championing of your polarized viewpoint, and are lucky enough to have an equally energetic opponent, you can cut the referees out entirely and force the

issue to be decided in a two-way war. To be successful, a would-be referee will have to shout as loudly as both of you (or be in a position to fire both of you).

3. The Power of the Dancing Referee

That is not to say all referee positions are bad or that all who play that role are high-anxiety types who value peaceable process over genuine, if acrimonious progress. Some people do skillfully play the referee role and dance an elegant dance of control with the dogs of war. Unfortunately, way more people play referee because they like thinking of themselves as "fair-minded" and "above it all" than because they see a situational need. For people with some experience, this "inexpert referee" stance is instantly identifiable. I personally have no problems being viewed as an extremist, and loathe being perceived as one of the goody-two-shoes "referees." But I always appreciate the intervention of a genuine and skillful referee: they usually have an awareness and appreciation of the true power of the apparently powerless extremists.They are able to contribute towards a resolution by applying a calibrated amount of control, rather than attempting to control down to a level that assuages their conflict-avoidance anxieties. Such a referee will even occasionally allow a fight to spiral dangerously out of control in order to exhaust the participants before stepping in. A ham-handed referee on a power trip gets in the way of resolution and forces the participants to waste some effort in cutting him/her out of the loop (101 on how to do this: undercut their credibility, draw in a different referee, collude with your opponent to escalate the tension beyond the amateur referee's control).

But if you spot a good referee, do all you can to legitimize his/her efforts to occupy the referee role. I am tolerably good at playing referee, but I have to admit I enjoy being one of the polarizers more!

4. The Power of Positioning

Positioning matters both literally and rhetorically. I won't bother about the latter, since everybody appreciates, at least in a rudimentary way, the power and importance of rhetorical positioning.

The literal kind of positional leverage lies in where you sit. Your position in what Chris Loving, a leadership coach, calls "the architecture of gathering." In a formal context, a LOT is determined by how well the chairperson and the room can see you and how well you can see the rest of the room. At Telluride, because of the way chairs were arranged (in semicircular rings rather than rows) I chose to sit near the back, but in a very visible portion of the back. Not because I am a typical back row "silent observer with one wise remark" kind, but because I can see and be seen. The benefit of being seen is obvious: your raised hand can rarely be overlooked, and it is easy to dominate the floor when it is your turn, when people don't have to twist too much to see your facial and body language. The power of seeing is less obvious. One benefit of being able to survey the room is that you can read group body language: is the left side of the room unhappy? Face 'em as you make your next conciliatory remark.

As a counterpoint, I have to say that other positions are not bad: they simply offer less individual influence to a selfish guy like me, but play different crucial roles. The intimacy of a cluster of seating allows for subtle and subconscious elements of bloc voting and reinforcement of opinion to come into play. Whether they realize it or not, people in an intimate cluster reflect and react to each other's body language, which in turn links their thoughts in imperceptible ways. Isolated way in the back (can see but not easily seen) provides good leverage for those who want the "silent interventionist" role. Situations with a

central fishbowl area (such as a small central conference table in a larger annular ring, or informal meetings where some choose to sit on the floor in the middle) had me puzzled for a long time. I couldn't see what role was being played by what I called the 'central huddle'. Then it struck me: they provide a very highly visible thermometer/barometer of current sentiment. When people say things like "I think we should vote because I think everyone has made up their minds" I believe they are basing their opinion partly on the collective body language and contributions of the "central huddle." There is probably significant power and leverage to be found in that role, but I personally can't figure out how that might be exercised.

5. The Power Of Listening and Citation

I do NOT mean listening in the therapeutic "active listening" sense of Rogerian therapy or the "respectful-dialogue" listening that diversity training coaches like to talk about. A meeting is not a group confessional, feel-good tool, collective catharsis event or an intellectual orgy. Those models of discourse have their place - a meeting isn't it.

A meeting is a partly adversarial setting, and pure "active listening" is not enough. By the power of listening, I mean the power that lies in consciously keeping track of what was said and using it to make the points you want to make. The average short-term memory of a group stretches just to the very last thing that was said. Most people react only to this last thing, and don't consciously attempt to remember anything before that. The canny listener tries his best to remember the highlights of everything he has heard and seen, for later use.

I learned this when I served on an interview panel interviewing high school students for a summer scholarship. A more experienced interviewer remarked that one of the signs of sophistication she looked for in a candidate was an instance of referring back to something that was said more than 10 minutes ago.

A corollary to the power of listening is the power of citation. Using what was said before gives you a lot of control. It is even more powerful if you remember who said it and what the exact words were, and can quote. Why? Because you automatically demonstrate that you were paying attention, making you more credible than others. Plus, you can temporarily borrow the "usual" supporters of the people you quote, because you did them the honor of remembering what their side said.

Extra Credit: keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Quoting your opponents more accurately than they can quote themselves is one of the most fascinating moves you can employ. The original speaker is put on the defensive, forced to fumble and clarify, and in the process loses control. If you want to experience true **schadenfreude** listen closely to what your opponents say. Do not admit to enjoying this experience.

6. The Power Of Non-Trite Compromise

Among the more useless things that can be said during a debate are statements of the form "well, there's merit to both sides" or "there is a trade off here between X and Y." Make an extremely subtle change and you suddenly have a great deal of leverage. The subtle change is this: **quantify** the trade off and list the options! If you can take an obvious "two sides" observation and change it to "Well, we have the following options, the weight of evidence is such and such, and the ideal compromise is at X" you will instantly take control of the discussion. Why is this? The reason is that you get to choose the incumbent, default compromise that others must then try to move. If you suggest a mix that is 75% X and 25% Y, those who want a different trade off point will be forced to come up with the arguments to

move the point. By being the first to suggest a concrete trade off point, you lend your position power, regardless of its actual merits. Why is this so hard, and so rarely used? Because it takes some creativity to list points in a spectrum of options and commit to one on the fly. But if you cultivate this skill, you will be able to take over any time a discussion stalls at an identified "two sides" plateau.

7. The Power Of Vocabulary Expansion and Contraction

Sometimes discussion gets bogged down simply because words with the exact right connotations haven't been introduced into the conversation (more about this and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in a later post). Alternately, words may be overused and reduced to meaninglessness Looking out for this and intervening (by introducing new terms or red flagging over-used ones) can save the day and move the discussion to a whole new plane. You may even introduce a new favorite word. At Telluride for instance, "substantive" was a much adored word for a while. Everybody went around looking for the "substantive" content of statements and it did us a world of good for a while, until "substantive" itself lost all substance. During a long meeting to discuss scholarship candidates, one smart participant red-flagged the adjective "engaging" as in "engaging personality," which had been so overused for several hours, it wasn't helping differentiate candidates at all.

8. The Power Of Controlled Aggression

Though I never use this (mainly because I can't fake it well enough), there is power to be had in losing your temper. The dramatic effect of a local explosion in one armchair has the effect of temporarily making people forget the many things they are trying to keep in mind and focus on the one thing the hothead wants to direct attention to. Lost tempers can also create a dichotomy where a confusing and uncomputable trichotomy or quadrochtomy (excuse the neologisms) existed before. With anger, you get to cut away deadwood, simplify things. Use with care. It can get you fired if used in the wrong place and time.
9. The Power Of Brinkmanship

Aced anger deployment? Welcome to aggression 201: brinkmanship - the threat of anger. Thomas Schelling invented the term brinkmanship to describe the strategy (cannily used by Kennedy during the Cuban crisis) of threatening to lose self-control. The problem with tempers - the meeting equivalent of nuclear bombs - is that they are too powerful and messy to use easily. What if instead of drawing attention to your issue, you provoke another explosion? Or reduction of discourse to the dichotomy you didn't want? Brinkmanship is a powerful way to manipulate the collective fear of lost tempers in a more graduated way than actual temper can. Unlike the black and white power of nukes, it gives you a wide range of power, ranging from subtle leverage to all-out war. You will see this phenomenon silently at work around people with a reputation for acerbic tongues: there will be a perceptible air of caution around such a person, so that by his/her mere presence s/he can force people to be less sloppy in their assertions.

10. The Power Of Emotional Control/Lack Thereof

Temper is not the only kind of emotional display that can affect control. Any sort of emotion works: hurt, disgust, disdain, expressions of moral outrage. Sounds callous? It probably is, if you ever use crocodile tears to manipulate a conversation. On the other hand, if you stay sensitive to the emotional content of the decision-making, and are able to produce genuine displays of emotional reactions, you can provide a real service. Just as the talkers can convert factual mutual beliefs (MB) into common knowledge (CK), the emoters can convert

unarticulated emotional content into openly acknowledged collective sentiment: from mutual emotion (ME) to common emotion (CE). From "everybody is sad" to "everybody knows that everybody is sad." I personally suck at this, and am grateful to people who do this well. More than once, sanity has been restored to situations (made horrible by jerks like me) by the emoters. On the other hand, nothing annoys me more than those who use this particular form of manipulation consciously and covertly. Though I am fine thinking of myself as (and being thought of as) Machiavellian to a degree, emotional modes of manipulation seem particularly heinous to me. Maybe it's a guy thing to think of rhetorical feints as fine, and loathe emotional feints. Probably hypocritical of me.

11. The Power Of the Me-Too

Ever tire of those "I agree with X, and I'd like to addâ€¦" kind of statements which add no real content to the discussion? Wake UP. Something subtle is happening that you are missing. Coalitions are being built on the fly with public declarations of support and commitment. Not only is this the basis of the emergence of voting patterns for the particular debate, it lays the groundwork for more lasting patterns of association and influence. Used with care, the power of "me too" statements in directing the course of long and short-term coalition formation is pretty big. Try building on thoughts rather than echoing them though, to avoid buying coalitions at the cost of being being perceived as individually stupid.

I personally am not too fond of this particular lever, since all too often, a long-term coalition building agenda derails a pressing immediate concern. Fine if you are trying to mentor a young person by lining up a couple of easy rhetorical victory for him/her, but potentially a source of deadly inertia if everything that is being said is about coalition building.

12. The Power Of Non-Egalitarian Engagement: Dare To Be Rude

Consider all the admonitions you have heard to "let other people have their turn" or "everybody should have a chance to have their opinion heard" and so on. At its extreme, an entire political, ideological and moral edifice is constructed on the holy grail of egalitarian discourse. Such a strictly egalitarian model of discourse has its place and uses. Trust-building in the initial phases of Arab-Israeli negotiation could probably use it. Icebreakers and introductions could, too. But to demonize genuine debate as evil and anti-people and to deify "respectful dialogue" and "active listening" as inviolable elements of an absolute collective morality is plain stupid. Far too many self-styled leadership coaches and meeting coordinators do this.

The effect of this conditioning - that equal airtime equals justice and World Peace -- is devastating. Smart people shut up out of guilt. Rambling idiots are not cut off.

There are several good reasons why meetings should not be held to silly egalitarian standards. A matter of special knowledge is being discussed. Would you give the two opposed experts 90% of the airtime and leave 10% to the lay folk, or give each individual his/her 10%? Someone is prattling on idiotically, would you rather cut him/her off or let them waste an additional 20 minutes of everybody's time? Yes, labeling a contribution as idiotic and useless is a judgment call. But the point of meetings is neither "respectful dialogue" nor formal competitive debate. A meeting is about talking for the sake of discovering collective wisdom, making decisions and solving problems. This calls for fundamentally different approaches to evaluating and controlling the value of what is being said. Adversarial weeding out of collectively-designated bullshit is the only know way to achieve this evaluation and control. Leave egalitarianism for the voting booth.

13. The Power Of Zero-Sum Brawling

I have fired a shot across the bows of "respectful dialogue" (which, I again emphasize, has its place in our rhetorical toolkit). To be fair, I should probably fire one across the bows of formal competitive debate as well, where the ultimate objective is to win the competition in the eyes of a jury. I win you lose. But I can't bring myself to be fair here. Perhaps because the status quo already demonizes this essential skill. Perhaps because I enjoy an occasional descent into bloody-minded, take-no-prisoners brawling.

Creating and manipulating debating stances in the group, creating polarizations and wars between entrenched positions, intentionally hurting feelings, framing issues in an "I win only if you lose" manner - each of these behaviors is morally suspect, particularly in the American imagination (other cultures tend to be a lot less nanny-like). Debate is rightly seen as a destructive force. Destruction is wrongly seen as a purely negative force. The element of genuine zero-sum debate is why meetings are creative-destruction processes and not candlelight vigils. Without clearing the deadwood of the collective mind with the controlled burns of aggressive and adversarial debating, collective decision-making and action is next to impossible. The forest fires of collective stupidity would take over. Don't shy away from a fight when one is necessary. If you need to prevent a disastrous vote in one minute by carefully employing an **ad hominem**, do so. The ends sometimes justify the means.

14. The Power Of Non-Zero Sum Engagement

Alright though I've been talking mostly about slightly manipulative techniques (because it is more fun), in the interests of full disclosure, I must point to a strong law: research shows that collective decision-making and negotiation is most successful when both sides come in with the expectation that new knowledge will be discovered and employed towards a mutually beneficial outcome. A non-zero sum stance in short. To me, the best way to achieve this is to sincerely make a best-faith effort to have good intentions overall, and not take things **too** personally. The ends justify the means only if they are first justifiable by themselves. Spice it up with a little brawling and you are all set for some alert collective thinking.

15. The Power of Humor

The last one. No, I don't mean the power of humor **in** a meeting. That's actually not such a great power -- humor usually drains momentum from a successful line of thought, or distracts from hard thinking. It is only occasionally useful in de-escalating tensions or creating resonances in the very rare sorts of meetings aimed at building up the chemistry of a high-performance team.

I mean the power of private humor in helping you engage larger discourses. If you never say much in meetings, you will never make a fool of yourself. If you talk to any significant degree, you will **always** run the risk of making a fool of yourself. If you have a ponderous self-image as a "sophisticated" meeting warrior, your falls will seem (to you and others) even more dramatic. The only way to engage and survive is to have a good-humored attitude towards your own failures. If you are not able to ruefully acknowledge and admit it when you've done something stupid, the other 14 laws won't do you much good in exercising influence.

Endote: If you liked this piece, you will definitely relish the fabulous and wickedly funny **The 48 Laws of Power** by Robert Greene. It is the only book that I have gifted more than once (usually to friends who've sunken into some sort of self-pitying gloom of victimhood and need some short, sharp shocks to snap them out of it). The style of this article is modeled on

that of the book. Buy below from Amazon!

The Fine Art of Opportunism

By: *Venkat* on *December 5, 2007*

There are four major approaches to decision-making: deliberative, reactive, procedural and opportunistic. The first three are well-understood. Academics study them, business and military leaders practice them, self-improvement gurus teach them and hippies protest them. Ordinary people understand them in common-sense ways. Opportunism though, is both the least-understood and highest-impact approach to decision-making. Here is my immodest 101.

An Example

Let's say you run out of coffee one fine morning. "Damn!" you say as you hurry out the door, bleary-eyed. "I need to get coffee." How might you deal with this situation?

You could plan a trip to the grocery store and implement that plan. This is the **deliberative,** or goal-oriented approach. Stephen Covey preaches it. Your grandmother drilled this option into your decision-making toolkit with "measure twice, cut once." Business leaders deploy it via Gantt charts and the much-derided waterfall planning approach. Most of the academic field of AI Planning obsesses over this approach.

You could view the observation that you've run out of coffee as an error-feedback signal that tells you that your Universe is Out of Balance, and run it through a mental process that repeatedly asks the question "What action might reduce the Severity of the State of Being Out of Coffee?" and implement the answer, repeatedly, until your senses report, "You now have coffee." Rather than **planning,** you take a first step, which might be "get in the car." Then you take another. And another. Until your Universe is In Balance again. David Allen preaches this approach. "One Step at a Time," your grandmother says. Business leaders wrap up meetings with this philosophy by demanding, "Who has the action items?" Most of the field of control theory obsesses over this approach.

Maybe you don't miss a beat. You put it on that grocery list magnetically attached to your refrigerator and head to work as usual. Come Saturday, at precisely 7:30 PM you embark on your weekly shopping trip, and Presto! magically your lack of coffee is corrected. Entire shelves in the self-improvement section are available to fill your life with such procedural "systems," that help you avoid the problem of making case-by-case decisions entirely by automating your life. To the point where you'll never need to overtly worry about coffee. Our prototypical guru here is Benjamin Frankin of **early to bed** fame. Lean Six Sigma coaches drive organizations towards this ideal of Proceduralize Everything. Most of the field of operations research is concerned with this approach.

Finally, you might just file away the no-coffee observation as a casual background thought rather than a "get coffee" intention. The next time you happen to drive past a grocery store, you remember, "Oh, that reminds me, I need coffee!" and you detour to grab some. No gurus preach this. Besides Shakespeare (pop quiz: which quote am I thinking of? For answer read to the end) little about this approach is in our database of common proverbs, and businesses do very little (the SWOT analysis is the only one that comes to mind, and it is not particularly good) with it. While there is some academic work on opportunistic decision-making, it is a minority concern fragmented across disciplines.

A subtle point: many people just see opportunism as reactivity in a different guise, but the two are in fact radically different. Why? Think about it. If you still don't get it, click "the buy me a cappuccino" link and I'll email you an analysis.

Deliberative approaches are high-effort, custom-solution beasts. They also require a LOT of thinking and even when done well, are very brittle in the face of changing realities.

Reactive approaches deal better with changing reality, but can easily get lost in a series of knee-jerk next-actions that head nowhere. You get into your car and drive a block towards the grocery store. You realize you forgot your wallet and head back. You notice you forgot to feed your cat just as you are heading back to the car, and now **that** supersedes your coffee intention. You will also be late for work.

Procedural approaches can be very efficient over time and low-cost, but at the expense of built-in inefficiency for particular instances (i.e., "go till the weekend without your morning coffee"). Clutter your life with enough procedure and your life will creak to a standstill, overloaded with all those "Just 15 minutes a day" routines (exercise for you: why does the infomercial formula of "just 15 minutes a day" lack believability even when it **is** true in a nominal sense?)

Now for the magic solution. Opportunism delivers coffee with low effort (say a 2-step detour instead of a 15-step deliberative plan), high reliability (since it is invoked closer to the goal state than reactive approaches, with fewer distraction/failure modes) and high responsiveness (no waiting for the weekend). Not only does the opportunist **not** get disrupted by the changing world, she actually takes **advantage** of it. It is often a she. Women seem to think this way more naturally than men. That's why, even among working couples, wives call husbands more often to pick up stuff on their way home from work.

The bad news: opportunism is a **probabilistically** effective way of getting things done. While on **average,** you will replenish your coffee supplies faster, more cheaply, with less thinking and less bureaucracy, there is a chance opportunism **won't** do the job. Unlike the others, a non-zero failure probability is built into the model, as opposed to being an unmodeled externality. The perfect opportunist may never get her coffee. You may never catch that perfect wave.

The Importance of Being Opportunistic

Here is why opportunism is so under-appreciated. Suppose you have your deliberative, reactive and procedural games in order. You'll get through your weeks, quarters and even years. You'll survive. You don't **need** opportunism. But year after year without opportunism in your toolkit, and a scary, frightening thing will happen to your life. It will become **ordinary.** You'll achieve nothing remarkable. In purely decision-theoretic, Las Vegas terms, you will fail to "beat the house." This is because the rational incentive structures of the world are designed to pay off less than the investment of rational players. Salaried jobs take more out of you than they pay. Non-financial rewards work the same way.

Opportunism is about working with and manipulating luck, not waiting for it. It is about engineering your path through life in such a way that the probability of disproportionate-returns events in your life is increased. You actually navigate by steering towards uncertainty and positive disruption because you know that your life is otherwise headed for ordinary outcomes. Here is a brilliant articulation of the point by a very smart scientist, Richard Hamming (he of Coding Theory fame) in his famous speech to Bell Labs titled **You and Your Research.**

And I will cite Pasteur who said, ``Luck favors the prepared mind.'' And I think that says it the way I believe it. There is indeed an element of luck, and no, there isn't. The prepared mind sooner or later finds something important and does it. So yes, it is luck. The particular thing you do is luck, but that you do something is not.
And:
Great scientists have thought through, in a careful way, a number of important problems in their field, and they keep an eye on wondering how to attack them... You can't always know exactly where to be, but you can keep active in places where something might happen. And even if you believe that great science is a matter of luck, you can stand on a mountain top where lightning strikes; you don't have to hide in the valley where you're safe. But the average scientist does routine safe work almost all the time and so he (or she) doesn't produce much. It's that simple. If you want to do great work, you clearly must work on important problems, and you should have an idea.
A word to the wise is sufficient. Enough motivation. Let's talk about how to become an opportunist.

The Prescription

Perhaps the single biggest barrier to opportunistic behaviors is a sort of puritanism drilled into us by most cultures that an outcome is not won fairly if it is won without an effort proportionate to its value. Gamblers are not respected in any culture. Not even smart gamblers who learn to count the cards at blackjack.

The skills that mark the opportunist -- a sense of timing and leverage, adaptability and willingness to rapidly shelve existing plans and disrupt procedures -- don't add up to what any culture views as an honest citizen. It doesn't help that our prototypical model of the opportunist is the politician. It also doesn't help that by all rational calculations, opportunistic behavior **looks** insane. If Outcome A is worth 4 months of planning, and you abandon it in favor of going after Outcome B, shouldn't Outcome B take 6 months of planning, by virtue of being more valuable than A? Does it not seem insane to shelve months of planning and pretty Gantt charts to act on hours or days of hasty paper-napkin scribbles? Yet that is often what opportunism **looks** like. It takes serious thought to understand that this is the **reason** opportunism works.

It works because opportunists are humble enough to realize that the random forces of nature are more powerful than themselves. That these random forces often conspire to make things ridiculously easy just as often as they conspire to create hurricanes and earthquakes. Most people realize that a lot depends on being in the right place at the right time. Very few realize that this situation is not the outcome of hard work or trying to identify and move to hotspots (visibly "happening" places are actually not, a phenomenon known as the El Farol Bar paradox, which is why hopping on bandwagons rarely pays). It is the outcome of a cultivated ability at **recognizing** when you are **randomly** in the right place at the right time (which also implies that there must be a certain amount of deliberate randomness in your wandering through life).

The cure begins with a sense of context and history. Week by week, very little happens that marks the importance of opportunism in the real world. Paychecks get delivered, tasks get done, plans play out as designed, reactions play out as learned, procedures chug along. But zoom out to decades and centuries and you'll notice that with almost boring predictability, the course of the world was altered by somebody taking advantage of an opportunity. Probe further and you'll notice that almost anybody (or any organization) with an episode of wild success or growth got started by spotting an opportunity and acting.

Once you've calibrated your mind right about the importance of opportunism, you can start learning specific behaviors to increase the degree to which opportunism shapes your life. Turn John Lennon's observation around: if Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans, make more room for life by planning less (and learning fewer reactions and installing fewer procedural systems in your life). And no, this is not about being spontaneous. That's for romance novels. Opportunism is a deeper and more fascinating attitude than spontaneity of the maudlin romantic variety. Here is a 7-step program.

Start by training (untraining?) yourself to be more of a daydreaming, idle, idea person. Put more unrealistic, unachievable desires in your head. Things that you **know** are going to be too difficult to attain from **where you are now.** This is how you **prepare for luck.**

Become aware of, and start cultivating, your ability to **recognize** opportunity. This is NOT the same as trend-spotting or trend-prediction. You are **not** trying to sensitize yourself to happenings in the world at large with a "listener" mindset. You are watching with a motivated bias for connections to things you've already thought about in some depth.

You've started noticing the right things? Good. Time to start **probing.** Probing means idle playing and dabbling. If something catches your eye, poke it with a metaphoric stick. Click on random ads, connect with people who intrigue you in unclear ways, act on impulses. Do **not** get sucked in and get addicted **only** to small, idle experiments. The key to probing is to drive towards yourself more information about opportunities you might be able to act on, and less information about stuff that will not yield opportunities. The reason this works is that most people just manage a deluge of zeroth-order information broadcast at everybody, and filter out what they don't want. To such people, it seems silly to actually go **after** even **more** information than comes at you naturally. But that's the key: information coming at everybody, no matter how sophisticated your filtering, is of limited value. Until you probe to discover first-order information that is **available** to all at low effort, but which few bother to poke out, you don't have much of an informational advantage. Think of it as using your stick to clear away fallen leaves as you stroll through the park. No more complex than that. No high-effort digging. Just more information than the guy without a stick.

Start developing a sense for **leverage.** Leverage is what creates disproportionate returns. Opportunists aren't lazy, they just act in focused bursts and get more returns for every ounce of action. But this only happens with a lot of idle watching. Leverage is a combination of **timing**, **selection** and **energy bursts.** You develop your instincts for leverage by pushing with varying amounts of intensity on the opportunities that your constant and restless probing will reveal. This will gradually lower your resistance to agile action, lower the inertia of your planned, reactive or procedural thinking, and prime you to act in bigger ways.

Act. If you've cultivated your opportunistic instincts in time, when an actual opportunity comes, you will **recognize** it faster, be more **prepared** to act given your background ideas, more **armed** to act, given the extra information your probing will have delivered you, and finally, more **willing** to act, even at the cost of disrupting well-laid plans, ingrained behaviors and ponderous rituals. Your sense of leverage will tell you how **much** you need to do. If you've accepted my religious preaching, you won't be held back by an unnecessary sense of guilt about trying to steal a bargain from Mother Nature when she isn't looking. But at some point, you'll actually have to start placing your bets, so learn to tell yourself in no uncertain terms, pure black-and-white terms: **this is it; I am going for it.** The worst thing ever is not knowing when you are committing, and paying the high cost of a 'dip' without realizing it. I did it once. It wasn't pleasant.

Burst. If all your work disciplines were acquired through a moral ethic and a sense of static work-life balance, you won't be able to do this. Within an extremely short period of time you have to bet a LOT. Not just direct effort (as in staying up nights), but relationships, earned trust, all your brownie points, money.

Rinse and Repeat. Here is the fun part. More often than not, you'll lose. Watch leopards hunt on the **Discovery** channel. You'll see burst after burst trail off into lazy ambles. That's

how you live the opportunist life, like a hunter. Which means after every failed burst, you go back to your laid-back, droopy-eyed-but-watchful life, waiting for the next window of opportunity.

Even if you never win, that's one hell of a rewarding way to live life, as Sisyphus found. Kipling said it pretty well, towards the end of **If.**

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
...

--you'll be a Man, my son!
But Shakespeare said it best of all in **Julius Caeser** (which I had to memorize in High School. I am glad I did. This quote is burned in my brain, and has served me well.)
"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures."
Fail to live this way, and you'll pay a high cost. The opportunity cost of your life. **Carpe Diem!**

Strategy, Tactics, Operations and Doctrine

By: *Venkat* on *September 24, 2007*

Suppose a job candidate walks into your office and hands you a resume. It proclaims, "strategic, systems thinker." You wince, and almost throw her out right there, but since other parts of her resume look promising, you decide to give her a chance and proceed with the interview. Now ask yourself, how would you actually probe if there is any substance behind the candidate's claim to strategic abilities? Here is a very good answer: ask the candidate to tell a story. Not any old story, but a relevant one, like how she views the history of development of her field. Or how she views her own personal trajectory. If you can't figure out why this is an excellent question, read on.

(Credit: many of the ideas in this piece came out of discussions with Mike Allers, ex-US Navy, in 2003, now a philosopher. More on that story later in this piece.)

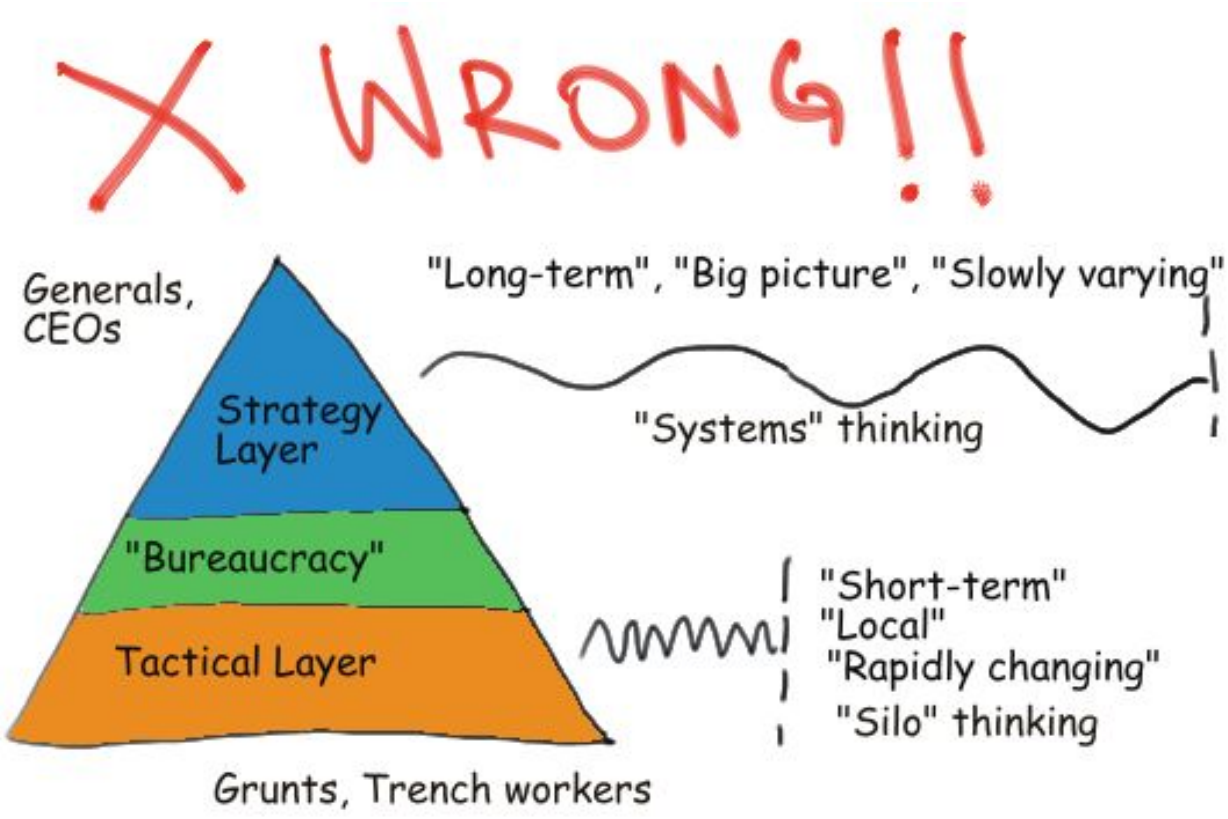
I react badly, **very** badly, to words like **strategy**. Even when people apply the term to me and mean it as a compliment, I cringe. This is because self-descriptions like **strategic thinker** (and dismissive insults like **mere tactician**) are at once irresistibly attractive, functionally unique (when you need them, very few other words will do) and so ambiguous that when they are used, the result is usually the worst sort of content-free hand-waving. Unfortunately though, you cannot dismiss **every** instance of the use of such terms as self-important gas from superior hand-steepling armchair generals. Occasionally, you'll actually be part of critically important conversations where terms like **strategy** and **tactics** are used with sophistication, and consequential matters hang in the balance. Occasionally, even idiots using these terms clumsily will be saying things you need to decipher.

But hopefully, through this piece, I'll be able to arm you with a cleaner instinct for this language. Note that my treatment is both normative and descriptive. Normative because I'll try to convince you that you **should** use such language my way (and because I've never

seen a comparable set of definitions anywhere). Descriptive because the most sophisticated users of such language I have met **do** in fact use the words in these senses.

The Triangle and Waves Model

Chances are, your mental model of complex decision-making, based on just the terms **strategy** and **tactics,** looks something like this picture, which is simple, elegant and wrong. I call this the 'triangle and waves' model because it conceptualizes the structure of decision-making with a triangle (implying hierarchy) and a set of time scales with shorter and longer cadences.



I won't tackle all parts of the diagram right away, but here is a sketch of why it is the wrong mental model to have in your head.

Relativism: Draw a bigger triangle subsuming this one, and/or longer/shorter time horizons. Everything changes, making your definition relative. You gossip that your annoying co-worker is "tactical" and doesn't see beyond his product to the whole product line. One floor above, some managers are shaking their heads and labeling **you** as tactical because you don't consider succession planning issues or morale, and are focused on just the product-line.

Reversal: The captain of a military unit is sent on the **tactical** mission of securing a bridge. "Private!" he barks at one of his men, "Place those charges at **strategic** points on the

bridge." (I made this up, but my military friends have assured me its not too unrealistic). Isn't strategy supposed to be on "top" of tactics?

Arbitrariness: Why three levels? Why not 2, 7 or 19? If it is just a matter of zoom levels, why only 2?

Over-specificity: Do strategic and tactical mindsets only exist in hierarchical decision-making contexts? Can strategists and tacticians exist among a set of nominal peers? Can an individual cook be strategic as opposed to tactical? Can a writer or comic-book artist? Can people trade roles, with tacticians temporarily doing strategy and strategists doing tactics?

So why do so many people seem to have this sort of picture in mind when they talk about complex decision-making? One reason is that it can **function** as being practically true under specific local conditions (like a stopped clock being right twice a day). We can get away with the vague notion that strategy is about the 'big picture' while tactics is about the 'details' because, most of the time, believing this doesn't hurt us.

But the problem is, it doesn't help us either. You cannot compute with this mental model, making it effectively useless. You can rationalize, but not reason, with this model. Here is an example. Suppose you are the chairman of the board of a company on the brink of bankruptcy. You've just fired your incompetent CEO and are scrambling to find a turnaround artist. What do you need? A **master strategist** or a **brilliant tactician?** Turns out, most of the time, you will need the latter, and that's often the type of person hired (in fact there are firms and executives who specialize in turnarounds). The triangle-and-waves model can be used to rationalize this. You could say turnarounds are "short-term" quick changes and therefore require "tacticians." But what is the reference scale? Is 6 months short-term or 3 years? You can tell this is a retrofitted explanation because the alternate ("To turn a company around, you need long-term focus on the rebuilding the fundamentals") sounds equally plausible.

I haven't completely demolished the triangle-and-waves model (that would take a longer essay) but I hope I've poked enough holes in it that you are ready for something better. I'll move on, but after providing you with a final question to undermine your confidence in the triangle-and-waves model. Which do you think is the more **abstract** construct? **Strategy** or **tactic**? If you answered "strategy" you've been misled by the model. Along the dimensions that **actually** matter, tactics are the abstract constructs. Strategies are the more concrete ones. I'll tell you why in a bit.

Four Definitions

To get at why the triangle-and-waves models leads you astray, let me introduce to you two terms that are part of military discourses but unlike **strategy** and **tactics,** haven't made as successful a leap to civilian language**.** These are **operations** (sometimes termed **logistics**) and **doctrine.** A popular cliche in the military goes: an amateur focuses on strategy and tactics, a professional focuses on operations (an observation validated by the fact that most video games have no operational elements). Operations is what the naive dismiss as bureaucratic middle management. **Doctrine** usually doesn't even appear in the lexicon of an inexperienced decision-maker. Here are my four definitions:

Doctrine: Doctrine is the set of assertions we accept as true in an action domain.

Strategy: A strategy is a set of action and sequencing commitments, consistent with doctrine, and driven by the **unique** features of an action domain that constrain, but do not define, plans and schedules.

Tactic: A tactic is an **abstract** action that can be applied in any of a large class of situations that conform to set criteria.
Operations: Operations is the discipline of realizing strategy in the context of a background of infrastructure systems, resources and processes using a **vocabulary** of tactics.

I don't (yet) have a clean visualization or metaphor, but here is how the concepts relate:

Strategies are imagined **stories** about possible worlds, whose constraints are determined by elements of **doctrine,** and whose vocabulary is determined by available **tactics.** Converting those stories into reality through appropriate mixes of deliberative, reactive and opportunistic planning, scheduling, resource allocation and risk management, in the fog of action, is the discipline of **operations.**

Quick example to illustrate the relationships. In World War II, the Germans invented the **tactic** of moving infantry on vehicles at the achievable speed of mobile artillery rather than keeping mobile artillery at the speed of soldiers marching, as was done in World War I. This lead to the **doctrine** of blitzkreig, which in turn constrained the specific **strategies** in the invasions of Poland and France.

Notice how, in this example, there is a complex circular relationship where the apparently low-level element (tactics) drives the apparent highest level (doctrine) which in turn rewires strategy. Hardly the simplistic case of picking a strategy and then fleshing it out with tactics.

Examples

Here are some examples demonstrating the use of these definitions in classification and short fragments of analysis.

The idea in the US military that one must control the tempo of a military engagement is an element of **doctrine** (hence "shock and awe"). So is the distinction between air **superiority** and air **supremacy**. In the corporate world, mission statements articulate **doctrine.** Pop quiz: what do vision statements articulate (hint: NOT strategy).
Strategic nuclear warheads are strategic because they can take out enemy cities and other assets that play **unique** roles in enemy social systems. New York, Moscow, New Delhi and Baghdad are not just large cities. They also play unique roles in their respective cultures.
Blowing up a bridge or securing a building is about tactics. Running a meeting effectively is tactics. Choosing **not** to describe yourself as a "strategic thinker" on your resume or in an interview is a **tactic** (based on the nugget of learned Groucho Marxian wisdom that people who call themselves "strategic" are perceived as NOT strategic).
A unique **context** can turn a tactical element into a strategic one. Blowing up any bridge is a matter of tactics. Blowing up the only bridge leading into your enemy's capital becomes a matter of strategy. A tactical nuclear warhead can be used to strategic effect if you use it to blow up your enemy commander-in-chief's bunker. In the business world, a crucial meeting about a merger can turn an everyday tactical skill into a unique, once-in-the-history-of-the-company strategic element.
The notion of "Information Superiority" in today's US military is a matter of doctrine. The related concept of "Network Centric Warfare" is a matter of operations. Business analytics is a tactical element, the idea of Open Innovation is doctrine, not strategy. Lean Six Sigma is about operations. IBM moving to services is strategy.
Placing a charge to blow up a bridge (a tactical objective in general) can be a strategic matter because you must identify the **unique** parts of the bridge structure that, if blown up, will cause the bridge to collapse most efficiently.
Tactics are abstract: they can be described in manuals with toy situations (for running a

meeting or blowing up a bridge). Strategies are concrete: they are best learned through case studies of specific real histories about real people and places, with names (ever wonder why military officers and MBAs train on case studies rather than game theory?)

Practice Questions

Can you analyze the "turnaround artist" situation described earlier and propose an argument why this person must be a tactician rather than a strategist?
Apply these definitions to a different domain. How would you tell a tactical chef apart from a strategic one? What elements of a chef's approach to cooking constitute doctrine? Is **Iron Chef** a game of strategy or tactics? What about **Dinner Impossible?**

Try art. What parts of making a portrait map to doctrine, strategy and tactics?

The Foundations

So why are these definitions justified? I'll provide a hint, but defer a full development of the underlying theory (I promise you, I have one!) for later. Here is the hint: think about the complexity of a decision problem in terms of the number of variables involved. Now think about the processing limits of a decision maker (7 plus or minus 2 items in short term memory, and similar constraints). Now think about how many repetitions it takes to master a skill (about 2000 for a motor skill), and the time it takes to get one repetition under your belt in a given domain. How many generals do you think will have a chance to become good at leading alliances in world wars through 2000 instances? If they don't have time to learn the "leading world war alliances" skill through repetition and practice, how do the Eisenhowers and Genghis Khans of the world come about?

To make it even simpler, consider toy examples. Why is Go, a game with a 19x19 board, and indistinguishable pieces considered "strategic" while Chess (6 unique pieces, 8x8 board) considered tactical? Why is cricket considered a strategic game with respect to baseball? Why is American football considered more strategic than soccer?

I'll address all these interesting foundational questions in a future piece (bookmark and check back), but for now, let me leave you with some simple rules of thumb to operate with, and a little history of my own interest in these matters.

The Cheat Sheet

I'll explain some of this in a later article (bookmark this and revisit, I'll add links), and leave some as homework exercises. (How's that for arrogance?) Keep in mind that individuals may display all four of these skills in varying amounts.

How to tell a real strategic thinker apart from a pretender

Strategic abilities are developed by studying case studies, which pick out unique features of histories of actions, highlight the important and ignore the irrelevant. If you tell a story incoherently, you are not a strategic thinker. If you tell a story dutifully and boringly well, respecting the canonical telling (or genre conventions), you **might** be a competent strategist, but are not a **talented** one. If you are able to tell a story in an exciting way that picks out the right elements to highlight, you might be a **talented** strategist. These are **necessary** conditions; by no means sufficient. This is one reason why 'a sense of history' is a symptom of strategic ability.

How to spot a doctrine artist

A doctrine artist -- a priest -- is a decision-maker who thinks about the consequences of asserting or denying various existing beliefs about actions, and adding new beliefs to the set of axioms. To spot talent at doctrine-setting, ask questions like "What are the fundamental assumptions of our industry today? Which of these do you think is changing?"

How to spot a tactician

Look for **practiced, non-disciplinary skills.** Most people have mastered at least one or two professional skills requiring specialized training, so looking for that doesn't help. But natural tacticians tend to have developed skills that **aren't** taught, but nevertheless require practice. These include conversation skills and meeting skills. Look in particular for things someone **could** have said or done, but **chose** not to.

How to spot an operationalist

Operationalists are usually the easiest to spot. They usually display a high degree of comfort with the design and maintenance of systems and processes and "getting things done."

Despite what many people think of me, strategy is not my strongest suit. Doctrine is. I tell interesting but not striking stories. Like Vonnegut's Kilgore Trout, I am better at making up clever premises for stories than actual stories. My tactical abilities are patchy, with pronounced weaknesses and strengths, as are my operational abilities. I'll deploy a **tactic** right now and not tell you what my strengths and weaknesses are.

Where this is coming from

Someday, I'll do the full version, but here is the short version. Back around 1994, I sat next to an Indian Air Force pilot (he flew Mig 29s) during a train ride, and had a long conversation about the differences in warfare driven by the differences between Soviet and American military hardware. Though I didn't realize it at the time, that was the first conversation I ever had about doctrine. I was an undergraduate at the time, and still not over my infatuation with encyclopedias of military aircraft.

Skip ahead to about 2000. I was in graduate school at the University of Michigan, and playing a small part in a US Air Force research proposal our department was submitting. We talked a lot about some very complex problems with very loose language. We used, and drew diagrams of, nebulous ideas like "strategy is about **what** you want to do, tactics are about **how** you do it." We proposed fluffy "three layer architecture" diagrams based on such foggy arguments. No wonder we lost the contract. Substituting one pair of ambiguous terms ("what" and "how") for another ("strategy" and "tactics") just makes things worse.

I survived and found other ways to fund my PhD, but was left with an uncomfortable sensitivity to clumsy language in this domain and wrote up some notes. In 2003, I met Mike Allers, who had just quit the US Navy to pursue a PhD in the philosophy of language. After a series of excited brainstorming sessions, we actually co-authored a proposal to study the semantics of the terms "strategy" and "tactics." We didn't get funded, but the ideas stayed with me and fermented. Between 2004 and 2006, I spent my time doing more Air Force research as a postdoc at Cornell, this time on things like command and control systems and notions of "situation awareness." In the process, I plowed through reams of military literature (mostly around the concepts of network centric warfare) and had some interesting

conversations with Fred Zeitz, a retired USAF Lieutenant Colonel. The ideas finally started coming together.

Somewhere along this long journey, two simple words, "strategy" and "tactics" become a 3-ring binder full of half-digested notes and thoughts on this sort of thing. You've just read the first of my attempts to finally process that 15 year line of thinking (and hopefully be done with it).

It'll take me some time to work out all these ideas in beta, so apologies for any incoherence. Any ideas you can add to flesh out my snowballing theories (Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli and Kautilya beware) appreciated.

Sapir-Whorf, Lakoff, Metaphor and Thought

By: *Venkat* on *December 16, 2007*

"What is thought?" is a question that is foundational by any reasonable measure. The best short answer I have found so far has been "thought is conceptual metaphor," and it is one of the enduring regrets of my life that it took me so long to encounter this answer. An undergraduate friend (hi there Max!) introduced me to George Lakoff and the notion he introduced, conceptual metaphor, just as I was finishing up my PhD, and it radically altered my thinking (and my thinking about thinking, a.k.a philosophy) from that point on. I can only wonder how different my life would have been if I'd read Metaphors We Live By as an undergraduate. So here is a discursive introduction to these ideas.

Sapir-Whorf

I was educated to believe that the fundamental historical schism in modern cognitive science was the one between behaviorism and the cognitive school, which came to a head with Chomsky's review of Skinner's **Verbal Behavior** (1959). That particular drama though, however you interpret it, is actually rather superficial.

The truly interesting **yin-yang** dynamic in the study of language (and as you will see, that implies the study of thought itself) is between the relative roles of universal and local components of thought. Chomsky's "Universal Grammar" plays the former role. The role of "local component" is played, I will argue, by Lakoff's idea of conceptual metaphor, which I'll explain in a minute. The **foundation** of conceptual metaphor though, is a somewhat controversial (and in a strict form, untrue) statement called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, one articulation of which (Whorf, 1959) reads as follows:
We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language [â€¦] all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.
Stated as baldly as above, the hypothesis is actually not much deeper than the idea that language is a matter of social convention (an angle which has been studied by philosopher David Lewis in Convention: A Philosophical Study). In other words, arbitrary conventions

which arise as a matter of historical accident and path-dependence determine language, which in turn shape thought.

If this concept is new to you, it will take some thought to get past the superficial contradiction and develop the right mental model of this particular **yin-yang.** Roughly, the synthesis is similar to that of the interplay of nature and nurture in genetics (the former defines the potential, the latter the expression thereof in a particular environment). You could say that Chomsky tells us what sorts of thoughts we **could** think, while Sapir-Whorf hints at what types of thoughts we **do** think.

This level of resolution seems to satisfy many linguists and computer scientists (correct me if I am wrong, but roughly the current consensus in the NLP community is that human languages are describable by "weakly"context-sensitive grammars).

An Example

Let's look at an example to highlight some issues. I'll use English and Hindi, two languages I understand, to highlight some aspects of thought-as-language. I recently wondered about the Hindi equivalent of the common English word **waste.**

Despite racking my brain and looking up a Hindi-English dictionary, I could come up with nothing that means precisely what the word means in English. There are related words -- **kuda** or **kachda** (garbage), **banjar** (wasteland), **nasht** (destruction), **barbaadi** (ruin), **bekaar** (useless), **anavashyak** (unnecessary) and **fazool (**superfluous).

Even adjusting for the fact that Hindi (and Urdu) have much smaller, slower-growing vocabularies, it seems curious that such a basic word does not exist. The clue lies in the fact that our modern sense of the term **waste** is something like "to not use/use suboptimally a valuable commodity or resource, and thereby allow it to degenerate." If you check out the English **etymology** of "waste" though, you'll find that older uses of the word "waste" were closer to the set of related Hindi words I've listed. Usages like **to lay waste,** or **ruin** or **waste away** comprise the origins of the term.

Though I can't prove it, a reasonable hypothesis is this: the **modern** sense of "waste" relies on a protestant/puritan ethic and an industrial cultural context that has a **general** mental model of "manufactured, value-added resource" and "optimal resource utilization." Older cultures have **specific** notions of "waste-able" resources like land, and their associated notions of loss involve natural or destructive-intent processes (such as ruin or decay). In an industrial context, there is an added sense of hard-won added value being lost. In other words, **waste** is mainly a waste of **effort** today.

The implication here is that a very complex environmental factor (an industrial culture) can affect the meanings of individual words.

But the basic linguistic analysis of this example is unsatisfactory. Chomskyean notions of grammars have nothing to say at all. Sapir-Whorf merely implies that perhaps modern English speakers can **think** thoughts involving the **concept** of "waste" (not the **word**) that Hindi speakers cannot. To this, I can testify; I cannot think certain thoughts in Hindi that I can in English. The converse also happens, but less often (a larger, faster-growing language does not necessarily subsume a smaller, slower-growing one -- the set of all even numbers below 1000 does not subsume the set of multiples of 5 under 500).

The problem of translation sheds further light on the relation between thought and language. Imagine a pair of languages to be represented by a dynamic Venn diagram with a large, fast-growing circle (English) intersecting a smaller, slower-growing one (Hindi). Given the non-subsumption remark, and the fact the the evolution of language is a creative-destructive rather than monotonic process, perhaps we should imagine growing, morphing fractal shapes, but we'll let that go for now. Would it be fair to say that pieces of text involving **only** words in the intersection are perfectly translatable both ways? This is obviously silly. The effect of a piece of text is the collective impact of a set of words and their nearby connotations, within a cultural context. Here is an example, a verse from a popular 1950s Hindi song:

Sab kuch seekha humne, na seekhi hoshiyari
Yeh sach hai duniya waalon, ki hum hai anadi

which translates roughly to:

I learned everything, but I did not learn street-smartness
It is true, oh people of the world, that I am a naive bumpkin

This is what I would call a partially idiomatic translation -- a subjectively judged mix of direct translation, and translation of the original's inferred **intent,** that makes use of **idiom** and **metaphor.** Let's look at a couple of pieces in detail.

Zooming in on the red bit, the Hindi-Urdu **hoshiyari** derives from the stem **hosh,** which means both "alert" (in both the medical sense of "lucid" and the sense of "watchful") as well as "conscious." **Behosh** is "unconscious" and **Hoshiyar!** is equivalent to the Western military call **Attention! Hoshiyari** as an abstract noun denotes a mix of intelligence, pragmatism and cleverness. You'd apply it to a precocious child, or in the sense of "too clever by half" to an adult. A Hindi speaker then, would find evoked mentally, a conscious sense of "clever/wordly-wise" and a subconscious web of associations stretching to concepts like "conscious" and "lucid." Clearly the closest **direct** translations (such as "clever") wouldn't work. You need an English **idiom** to capture the Hindi **word,** because you are trying to capture the impact of a web of connotations around n particularly leaky, ambiguous term.

Something similar holds for the blue highlighted bits. The closest direct word I can think of, for **anadi,** is **ingenue**, but this explicitly refers to a **female** sufferer of naivete, and has the added disadvantage of a particular cultural prototype (a young French girl being introduced to Paris, say). **Anadi** on the other hand, has the prototype of a bumbling male simpleton, often a rural migrant to the Big City. Something like "country mouse" would work very well, but the reference to a very specific Western folk tale has its own problems, hence the decision to go with a clumsy compound non-metaphoric phrase, **naive bumpkin.**

A word also has irrelevant connotations, via similar-sounding but unrelated words. **Anadi** (sometimes spelt **anari)** sounds similar to **anar** (pomegranate). A Hindi-speaking listener to the original, therefore, might have a subconscious sense of "pomegranate" which an English-speaking listener to the translation would not.

So, to go back to our original Venn diagram, given any set of words in the intersection, the webs of associations and **non sequiturs** radiating out from original and translated versions will inevitably leak all over, leading to very different effects in the two languages. Translation

then, is a matter of keeping the webs as contained and close as possible. In my limited experience (I have done a couple of serious Hindi-English translations like this one), the balance between metaphoric/idiomatic and literal that best captures the original intent **as perceived by a single individual** is a delicate one that depends a LOT on the piece under consideration. Add the fact that you generally want to use syntactic structures of similar compactness in translation, to generate comparable rhythms and cadences on both sides, so nonverbal effects harmonize, and translation begins to appear impossible.

But it gets worse. Meaning, remember, is constructed by an individual listener with a history and a mental model of the world, not by an abstraction like "English Speaker." We'll get to that level of detail after reviewing conceptual metaphor.

Conceptual Metaphor

Ask yourself this: in the previous example, why did a more ambiguous construct (the metaphor **street-smart**) work better to contain the original meaning of **hoshiyar** than a nominally-close direct translation like "smart"? One key is that the metaphor anchors to a non-linguistic sensory experience (a swaggering person on a street -- perhaps English speakers think of John Travolta in **Grease,** while Indians think of Aamir Khan in **Rangeela**) that constrains meaning more powerfully than abstract words could.

Lakoff and Johnson, in their seminal Metaphors We Live By, turned that sort of tiny, trivial observation into a powerful theory of how thought and language work. Their crucial first step was to distinguish visible, obvious metaphors, or **figurative** metaphors, from more systematic, large-scale and linguistically less-visible entities they named **conceptual** metaphors. "Inflation is up" is an example. "Up" is a geometric notion that relates to space and inflation is an abstract financial quantity. The statement involves not one but **two** conceptual metaphors: a spatial-0rientational one ("Up") and a material-expansion one ("inflate"). The breakthrough achieved by Lakoff and Johnson was in realizing that these are not a minor, subtle and exceptional third category beyond literal and figurative language. Their work showed that such conceptual metaphors account for practically **all** language, and also get to vast realms of non-linguistic (such as mathematical) thought. In the Lakoff-Johnson approach, you describe a conceptual metaphor with an "X is Y" title. Here are parts of their opening examples (Chapters 1 and 2 of MWLB; you can find many more in this repository):
ARGUMENT IS WAR

Your claims are **indefensible**
He **attacked** every **weak point** in my argument
I've never **won** an argument with him
You disagree? Okay, **shoot!**

TIME IS MONEY

You're **wasting** my time
I don't **have** the time to **give** you
I've **invested** a lot of time in her
He is living on **borrowed** time
These are very different from figurative metaphors ("He was a lion in the battle" or "The architecture was very musical"). They are at once more subtle, broader and more systematic in scope, and fundamentally, not about language at all. MWLB points out that this is the **normal** way English speakers talk about arguments and time. These are not poetic or extraordinary uses. Moreover, these are not **necessary** ways of talking about arguments or

time (though I believe that **some** conceptual metaphor is usually necessary, just not any **specific** one). MWLB offers up an quick analysis of the first one: "Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way." The fact that we can imagine an alternate possible world where arguments are understood differently tells us that ARGUMENT IS WAR is not the only way to structure thinking about arguments.

Conceptual metaphor is a very complex concept. MWLB covers very fundamental ones (such as spatio-temporal, ontological and causation metaphors) that appear in every language, as well as more localized, less fundamental ones. It is hard to define the idea, but here is one of the better articulations (Chapter 1):
The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of experience in terms of another.
The key attributes of conceptual metaphor are **systematicity** (concepts maintain their relationships in a **gestalt** sense), **incompleteness** (ARGUMENT IS WAR and ARGUMENT IS DANCE highlight different subsets of the framework of concepts and relations called ARGUMENT, and neither is complete), and **sensory** nature (the conceptual metaphor generally maps a more abstract domain to a more sensory one). There are also much deeper aspects, like the distinction between metaphor on the one hand and generalization and abstraction on the other.

It is not the intent of this piece to provide a tutorial on conceptual metaphor. You could try some online material, such as the Wikipedia entry, but there is really no substitute to reading Metaphors We Live By. But we can get a sense for the profundity of the idea simply by looking at the prolific output of Lakoff and his collaborators since MWBW. In books like Don't Think of an Elephant and Moral Politics the ideas of metaphoric frames and narratives are explored in the context of political discourses. In Philosophy in the Flesh the ideas are ambitiously applied to the entire field of philosophy of mind.

But perhaps most interesting for people like me, is Where Mathematics Comes From, which extends these ideas to an examination of mathematical thought. If you thought mathematics could be anchored in sensory thought only to the limit of 3d geometry, think again -- **all** mathematics is driven metaphorically. Why do you "plug" things into equations? Why do you "move" terms in equations, or "group" them, or "crank through" a derivation, when all that is physically happening is repeated writing of related symbolic sentences? Even at a very superficial level, a MATHEMATICS IS MECHANICAL MANIPULATION metaphor works very well. You can get much deeper, all the way to a beautiful explanation of Euler's very abstract, apparently far-beyond-intuitive grasp equation,

[tex]e^{i\pi}+1=0[/tex]

using an appropriate application of conceptual metaphors at work (explaining the equation above metaphorically is the **tour de force** bit of WMCF).

Beyond Conceptual Metaphor

The idea of conceptual metaphor goes far beyond its linguistic roots, once you understand that it is a way of talking about **mental models.** We organize our sensory experience, starting with what William James called the "blooming buzzing confusion" perceived in childhood, using some very basic pre-linguistic conceptual categories, relations and intuitions of causation and dynamicity. On this base is constructed layer after layer of inter-related models of parts of experience. While conceptual metaphor manifests itself most vividly in language, it also manifests itself in mathematics, geometric thinking, abstract

visual thinking (every graph you ever drew or saw is a metaphor), narratives and storytelling and modal/subjunctive reasoning about possible worlds. It is also central to sophisticated decision-making. It is also foundational to the thinking style that is loosely referred to as " right brained," which explains why Lakoff looms large in Dan Pink's A Whole New Mind . Conceptual-metaphoric thought is also fundamental to ideation.

Not all these directions have been thoroughly explored, but there is definitely no shortage of evidence that conceptual metaphor is a foundational element of thought. Even my original reductive definition: **thought is conceptual definition,** doesn't seem too hasty, once you examine the full scope of ideas we are talking about.

You can even get beyond humans to computers. Kenneth Iverson's seminal 1979 ACM Turing Award Lecture, "Notation as a Tool of Thought," while not explicitly about metaphor, is essentially a Lak0ff-and-Johnson for constructed symbol systems used as programming or mathematical languages. Another interesting unusual domain where the ideas of conceptual metaphor (understood in the broader sense of "mental models") shed light, is in an analysis of modern "silo" languages and their inter-relationships, and the role played by modeling and language in getting, for instance, accountants, managers, lawyers and marketers to understand each other in a modern corporation. This issue has been explored in the fascinating (and mostly non-technical) article, **"On languages for dynamic resource scheduling problems"**

The Last Frontier: One-to-One Communication

Ultimately, languages viewed as larger cultural entities are relatively easy. I'll wrap up by revisiting the question I raised earlier. What happens when you acknowledge that meaning is constructed by an individual listener with a history and a mental model of the world, not by an abstraction like "English Speaker?" Analyzing communication at its atomic, 1:1 level is so hard that it has led to statements such as Wiio's law: **communication usually fails, except by accident** (a commentary on this is to be found here). This observation goes beyond the trite observation that all models (conceptual-mental or mathematical) are finite and therefore incomplete.

One-to-one communication is nothing less than the interplay of two dynamic, evolving entities. It is not about the transfer of specific intended bits of information from one locus to another. It is more like billiard balls influencing each other via collisions. Yes, bits get transferred, but the **intended** bits getting transferred mostly happens by accident. Even toy examples are subtle. Take a trivial example: if in December I tell you "It is snowing in Rochester" I am not transferring the one bit of information "SnowRochester=ON," I am more likely provoking the thought "This guy is an idiot who states the obvious" or "Hmm...an invitation to a casual conversation/social ritual." Even if the bit IS substantive (like saying, in December, "It is sunny and 80 degrees today in Rochester") the sentence will likely provoke the thought, "Hmm, there is an unseasonable weather pattern...global warming?" rather than the overt predicate being transmitted.

Two speakers of the same language are very different information processing systems. Both have different vocabularies (both conceptual and linguistics) arranged in very different mental models of the world.

Really, what happens when **A** speaks a sentence to **B,** is that **B's** internal mental model of the universe, or "information state" gets updated. This is the idea underlying the relatively modern field of dynamic semantics, which I recently learned about through a friend completing a PhD in the philosophy of language. This closely parallels the model of

cognition implicit in the belief-desire-intention (BDI) approach in the philosophy of action and AI, and also parallels the basic conceptual model of control theory.

Which should explain why, if there is a single most foundational idea behind much of my writing on this blog, it is conceptual metaphor.

Framing the Consciousness Debates

By: *Venkat* on *July 26, 2007*

What David Chalmers calls the "Hard Problem" of consciousness has been among the main reasons I started this blog. If you view it honestly, it is the last remaining fundamental mystery and, were I to be as extreme as Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus, I would go so far as to label it the only problem worth studying (Camus said that about suicide though). I meant to segue into this topic slowly, by first posting reviews of a bunch of relevant books as anchor points for my views, but blog readers have an unsettling habit of jumping the gun, and derailing the best-laid roll-out plan with untidy comments. So here we go. I'll frame and circumscribe my approach, state my axiomatic commitments, bluntly partition the landscape into the relevant and irrelevant, and we'll get set for exploring the Last Great Mystery.

Why Framing is Hard

When you deal with something as fundamental as consciousness, you have to first formulate the problem of formulating the problem. In fact, it can take several chapters of a carefully-written book like Chalmers' The Conscious Mind to even make a case that there **is** an actual problem. That we are not merely talking about confused self-referential processing by a neuro-computer. That labeling it an 'emergent' property of a complex set of algorithms is misguided at a very basic level.

When it comes to consciousness, there is so much complexity and so many irrelevant (or at best, marginal) sideshows that one party or another holds dear (sneak preview: AI, religion, neuroscience and 'humanism') that a full-blown open debate is impossible. You will either be reduced to Consciousness 101 level irrelevancies like whether computers can be "creative" or have huge dissonances, like that between (say) Daniel Dennett and David Chalmers, or between those who view the experiential-report evidence from mystic traditions as legitimate and those who do not.

The 101 level debates are boring, and the advanced debates between polar extremes are irrevocably stalled. The only hope for interesting progress is to commit to the camp that you resonate with the most, and look for movement there. Ignore the beginners who are yet to get beyond a few nights of stoned introspection, and ignore your intellectually solid but too-distant peers. We'll bridge that gap in 2025. Until then, I'll listen, but not engage, certain viewpoints like Strong AI.

So where am I on this spectrum of development of sophistication of views? Not 101 certainly. My bookshelf on consciousness and mysticism groans under a collection of some 30 volumes (more than half of which I've actually read). I've done a couple of informal talks about the subject. And I have one data point from a personal "mystical" experience (they are not as rare as you think, you can stop feeling special if you've had one too -- I estimate that

1 in 4 or 5 people have had experiences comparable to mine, and they're not particularly hard to get to). But more on that later. So I am not at the 101 level, and 101 level debates bore me to tears. I am also not a professional though, and haven't worked years writing volumes on the subject. So one of the things I will be doing with this theme is exploring ideas at say, a 501 level. I'll eventually post a bibliography if you want to catch up and keep up.

Keep in mind though, that almost everything that has been written is about clearing away clutter that is **not** relevant. Surprisingly little has been said on the subject that **is** relevant in a non-negative-definition sense. But you have to clear the clutter, and there the literature helps.

I'll studiously ignore 101 level questions or at best say "read Chalmers" or something along those lines. This is not because I am snotty about my extensive reading in this area. It is because even for the talented thinkers in this field, who I frequently cite, providing a careful account of even the most trivial-sounding question, like whether we all experience 'blue' the same way, can take entire chapters. And still achieve no progress besides eliminating the sillier wrong answers.

The Framing Problem

So here is the framing problem, which might itself be critiqued, but let's not backstep our way to exhaustion. If you answer this for yourself unambiguously, you will at least know where to begin looking for the real question. The framing problem is to force yourself to make clear assertions about the following things questions:

Do you or do you not believe that subjective consciousness is a real , as yet-unexplained, mystery? (Chalmers estimates that about two thirds of academics engaged in the question believe it is. Daniel Dennett wrote a book titled "Consciousness Explained" that represents the other third who think it has been explained. That's the schism. Live with it.)
If you answered 'yes' to Question 1, which sub-category of stances do you adopt (the main current candidates being a) that consciousness is a fundamental property of the universe like mass/time, b) that it is a an epiphenomenon of brains only, or c) it has something to do with quantum mechanics that manifests itself due to the peculiar structure of the brain). There are about half a dozen other views which I don't view as even being contenders.
What elements of the consciousness debates do you consider relevant, marginally relevant and irrelevant respectively? There is a laundry list of things you need to make up your mind about, which I'll provide in a minute.

That's it. That's the framing problem. My own commitments have been made: yes to 1, choice a) for 2, and the rest of this post for 3. If you believe 'no' for the first question (a stance usually, but not exclusively, identified with what is known as Strong AI), then I probably have nothing to say to you that hasn't been said already. It isn't that your viewpoint is provably unsound -- it is just that debate is fruitless at this stage of evolution of both options, and primarily consists of noisy public showboating. A prime example of this is Daniel Dennett dismissing certain points of view as 'you are a mysterian' (a category he made up) on venues like Slate's Meaning of Life TV. Entertaining, but not particularly helpful in moving the debates forward. Neither side can completely undermine the other at this stage, but neither does direct engagement help. Each side has significant internal work to get done first.

Scoping the Specifics

Once you decide you want to roll up your sleeves and do some non-trivial thinking about

consciousness, you have some prep-work to do. In the framing problem, answering question 1 is easy if you have read a couple of books (or even if you are navigating only by introspection up to this point). Question 2 is tougher if you don't know about some of the frames in play, but I'll help you along for that in a future post, but Question 3, fortunately, is a much simpler matter of logical grunt work and figuring out the implications of your foundational commitment from Question 1.

The grunt work consists in making up your mind about several themes that have been proposed as candidate elements (or even centerpieces) of the debate. Here is the list of the usual suspects, probably incomplete, but covering 90% of the words you'll see and hear in the debates. You may want to print out this page and pencil in your opinions if you want to follow along this thread of blog posts. I'll elaborate on my own commitments in a minute.

None of this, unfortunately, is a moment's work, but you can do an instantaneous self-assessment and evolve that. I'll be addressing at least a few of these themes. To form a substantial opinion and avoid getting trapped into unnecessary trails of thought that others have mapped and dismissed credibly, you need to do some reading.

Themes List

Neuroscience of the fMRI localization variety ("decision making is located in the **anteriorus crapulus"**)
Neuroscience of the brain damage/counterintuitive phenomena variety (as in Oliver Sacks' books)
Artificial Intelligence
Complexity and 'emergence' (of the Douglas Hofstadter and Santa Fe varieties)
Foundations of mathematics (stuff like Godel's theorem, Brouwer's view of the continuum, and so forth)
(Human) Psychology
Humanism and ethics
Mysticism and mystic experiences (East or West; cultural silos are irrelevant. If you are a Westerner, think about the Christian mystic Hildegrad von Bingen if Vedanta and Zen make you uncomfortable and New Ageism leaves you cold)
Religion of the organized variety with an associated theology and historicism
Unsolved fundamental physics problems (primarily, but not only, quantum indeterminacy)
Western philosophy of mind (Descartes, Ryle, all the way up to Chalmers)
Language and its phenomenology
Other Western metaphysics subfields besides PoM, such as ontology and epistemology
Eastern metaphysics, separated from the related theology (primarily the varieties of Buddhist and Vedantic and non-Vedantic Indian metaphysics -- recall that in the West, there was a philosophy-religion split, or more correctly, a theology-metaphysics split, perhaps dating back to about Aquinas, that has no parallel in the East. So you have to do the separation artificially, since I do think that the split is a useful and necessary operation)

My Commitments

Here are my commitments. I parse the themes into **irrelevant, distraction, useful** and **fundamental.** A word on the middle two categories is in order. There are many things that lead to revealing arguments that illuminate some aspects of the mystery of consciousness (more so for some stances than for others), but for some, the illumination comes at the expense of a whole lot of distraction. Language is an example. To me, the argument that **dogs fall into my definition of 'conscious', dogs don't have language, ergo, language is irrelevant** is sufficient to ignore language as a fundamental feature. Whatever insight

thinking about language provides then, comes at the expense of enormously distracting debates of the sort Steven Pinker likes to get into (he of "How the Mind Works" and acolyte-of-Chomsky fame). Not worth it. Language, however interesting a subject **qua** language, is too expensive an indulgence for a spartan attack on consciousness.

So here is my parsed list. I'll justify some commitments, defer some, and simply assert an opinion on others without defending them (usually because it takes too long and others have done a better job already).

Remember, my classification follows from my commitment to answer a) to Question 2. If you answered differently, you will parse differently.

The Irrelevant

Humanism and ethics
Religion of the organized variety with with an associated theology and historicism

The Distracting

Almost all of AI, except for occasionally useful thought experiments. The slug is 0.01 on the consciousness scale, ergo, most talk of AI capabilities is completely distracting. The 0.01 level scale consciousness of a slug with 127 neurons is just as mysterious as the fact that you can critique Van Gogh and HAL (as yet) can't. Let's stick with the simpler cases and not go to the more complex cases unless they reveal some subtlety. Haven't seen any such revealing subtlety in the reams I've read from AI so far. Even the famous Searle-Dennett Chinese Room debates are a distraction once you plow through the details.
Neuroscience of the fMRI localization variety. See **Mind Wide Open.** Learning the physical address of something in the brain is not particularly helpful. All you need from the neuro-morphological research literature is a rough-and-ready understanding of gross structure (like neocortex versus brain stem). The rest is detail. Noisy detail. If something in that world is curious enough and helpful enough to this debate, you'll hear about it in a more digestible context from a hard-working philosopher who will filter out the noise for you.
Language and its phenomenology. This is a hard area for me to dismiss as a distraction, because I hugely enjoy all my reading and thinking in this area, and it is deeply revealing in other ways.
Complexity and 'emergence' (of the Douglas Hofstadter and Santa Fe varieties). Again, it pains me to have to put this class of literature in the 'distracting' class, but I can only view my immersion in that for the better part of a decade as a waste of time, at least for the purposes of exploring the consciousness problem. It is useful for thinking about other things, but not for consciousness.

The Useful

Neuroscience of the brain damage/counterintuitive phenomena variety: This is useful because it can lead you away from certain pointless lines of thought. For instance, does the brain construct reality or perceive it? The data is in. It constructs reality. You do not need to agonize over this. Read Dennett to understand how (in particular the Stalinist vs. Orwellian models of how the brain parses sensory data). Understand, internalize, move on. The mystery isn't hiding there.
(Human) Psychology: Not useful in the way you might think, in terms of what it says about the subject itself (hint: "almost nothing"), but in terms of what it tells you about the pitfalls of your own thinking about a topic that is so intimately and trickily entwined with your sense of (objective psychological) self.

Mysticism and mystic experiences: most people either ignore (out of unreasoned suspicion or reasoned skepticism), underrate or overrate the importance of evidence from mysticism, so since this is a theme where I take a possibly very unusual stance, I'll elaborate in a separate post.
Other Western metaphysics subfields besides PoM, such as ontology and epistemology: these help skewer certain viewpoints like the 'Cartesian Theater' but are not in themselves directly relevant.

Fundamental

Western Philosophy of Mind (Descartes, Ryle all the way up to Chalmers): You need this, and you'll understand why when you read Chalmers and realize that it takes a hundred pages even to create a secure sandbox for thinking that is insulated from the distracting attacks of, say, Daniel Dennett. There is a vast, sophisticated and nuanced vocabulary that WPoM brings to the party (example, "qualia") and a neat array of powerful thought experiments (like the Zombie problem and the inverted spectrum) that clarify a whole bunch of muddy issues.
Eastern metaphysics, stripped of mythological trappings: studiously (though not conspiratorially as some imagine) ignored by the Western academy, mainly because it has no clue how to methodologically integrate what Eastern metaphysics has to say. It is mainly the second rung amateurs from outside philosophy (primarily neuroscientists who are stuck in synaptic weeds, and some AI folks infatuated with Zen **koans**) who introduce these ideas into the Western academy. To be fair, the few remaining intellectually rigorous Eastern philosophers roundly ignore Western ideas too, besides occasionally whining about credit attribution issues (I have a friend -- sorry to call you out Rashmun! -- who frequently brings up the point that the **Mimasaka** philosopher Kumarila Bhatta developed the dreaming argument before Descartes. Yeah, yeah, let's move on!).
Unsolved fundamental physics problems (primarily, but not only, quantum indeterminacy). Chalmers dismisses this as not relevant, and that's an area where I break from his views. I don't agree or disagre; I just think the jury is still out, and that fundamental physics is **at least** as mysterious as consciousness itself. Think about it. Mass, space and time are fundamentally just as confusing as the fact that there happens to be an 'I' sitting inside your head (just behind your eyes, apparently).
Foundations of mathematics (stuff like Godel's theorem, Brouwer's view of the continuum, and so forth)

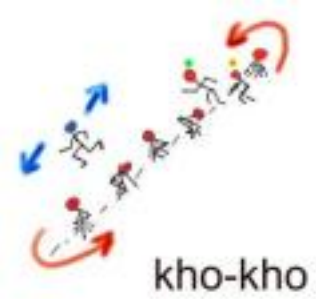
Whew! That was quite a trek. And that was just to get to the starting line. Hopefully we'll make some progress in the next post.

The Other Games Indians Play

By: *Venkat* on *April 17, 2008*

A few months ago, I read a thoroughly depressing book by V. Raghunathan, Games Indians Play: Why We Are the Way We Are. **That** book is a game-theoretic exploration of Indian **weaknesses.** Being a strengths-oriented guy, I am offering up a much more energizing look at **real** Indian games and what they reveal about us. I'll talk about three games -- **Kabbadi, Kho-Kho** and **Lagori** -- and tell you how these games, viewed as business metaphors, help explain some widely-recognized Indian **strengths,** particularly in the area of management thinking. I hope it provides some introspective fun for my Indian readers, and some insight into the Indian psyche for my non-Indian readers worrying about outsourcing decisions.

Kabbadi



kho-kho

Lagori

warning: this article is chock-full of what might seem like blatant stereotyping, cultural essentialism and even gender-bias. See my end-note if you insist on reading those intents into the piece. I am making the best-faith assumption that you are capable of reading this with a sophisticated eye!

Get Outta My Way Raghunathan!

Let's first get Raghunathan's approach out of the way. The book applies game theory (along the lines of Axelrod's The Evolution of Cooperation) and behavioral economics (along the lines of Freakonomics) to "explain" the many (and there are **many**) ugly social behaviors that are characteristically Indian, ranging from not boarding planes in orderly ways, to jumping queues, to littering. I put scare quotes around **explain** because the book doesn't really offer fundamental explanations so much as it builds **a posteriori** phenomenological models. And that's why the book is depressing -- it paints Indians as culturally hopelessly-flawed and impossible to reform. The book is a classic example of S. Gurumurthy's tongue-in-cheek acronym GURU -- "great at understanding, relatively useless." Full disclosure: my middle name is also Guru. Really.

So my summary opinion of VR's GIP is GURU. I am not entirely critical -- I do think the book asks the wrong questions, but they are interesting ones nevertheless, and the book is a pleasant one for a medium-longish flight. But ultimately Raghunathan is playing yet another weakness-game Indians like: the impossible-problem game. We even have an idiomatic

Indian-English phrase for this self-identity: **we are like this only, mind it** (if you can't parse that English, never mind, long story). Now let's move on to VGR's OGIP, which I hope, is less GURUish and more useful.

Other Games Indians Play

You don't normally put "games" and "Indians" in the same sentence. The stereotype, largely justified, is that we are beyond embarrassingly bad at most modern international sports. We will undoubtedly embarrass ourselves yet again in 2008 up North, at our friendly neighbor's (in China, for the slow). The board games that history associates in some way or or other with India -- Chess, Parchisi and the like -- are usually used as evidence of our tactical, pointlessly and self-indulgently cerebral, metaphoric and metaphysical approach to life.

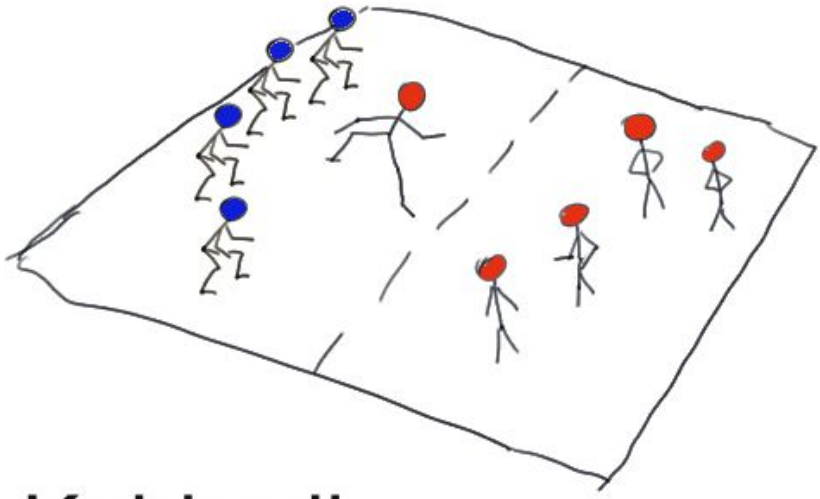
But this is not about these "usual" themes that come up in conversations about Indian sports. This is about 3 games that, as far as I know, nobody else in the world plays but us. There may be related games in other cultures, but key to this article is the fact that these are **popular** Indian games. We (at least my generation, I don't know about the Indian Gen Y) grew up playing these games.

Look for these six themes as I describe the games. I'll elaborate later.

Individual-Group Tension: First, you'll notice a common thread of tension between **individuals** and **groups** in all these games.
Creative-Destruction: Second, you'll notice an element of creative-destruction, especially in the third game, Lagori.
Breathlessness: Third, you'll notice that all three games are breathlessly fast. They go beyond 'think on your feet' fast -- they are what I think of as **sub-tactically** fast, even faster than basketball. You have to play almost on pure instinct, interspersed with occasional conscious decisions that must be made in almost no time at all.
Burst-Reversal-Energetics: Fourth, you'll notice that the games have an odd cadence of very short periods of relaxation punctuating fast context switches between opposed bursts of action.
Attrition: Fifth, all three games have a last-man-standing element to them
Leaderlessness: Sixth, none of the games have captain-roles, or indeed, **any** fixed roles. All roles are situational, not formal.

Kabbadi

Kabbadi is a territorial defense game. Sides alternate in sending an invader (Red team in the picture below) into enemy territory. The invader must touch ('tag') as many opponents as possible and escape back into his territory. If he succeeds in getting back, everybody he tagged is out. If the opponent team manages to tackle and pin him in their territory, he is out. The catch: the invader must carry out his entire raid while holding his breath. As evidence of holding his breath, the invader must chant something rhythmic out aloud very rapidly. The usual is the word **kabbadi.** The game has alternating raids going on in rapid succession, with barely a pause to take a breath. Eventually attrition of tagged or pinned players leaves one person standing, and his team is then the winner.



Kabbadi

Kabbadi can be brutally violent, more so than Rugby or American Football even, in some ways. It is a full-contact wrestling sport (often played in sandy courts, much like traditional Indian **akhada** wrestling). It also involves very rapid teamwork on the defending team's side, since they must avoid getting tagged until they've created a formation (a linked semi-circular ring of defenders circling warily around the attacker, attempting to get between him and the center line, is a common formation). Once they see an opportunity, they tackle. The raider, on the other hand, tends to dart around to avoid getting hemmed in, while trying to pick off the defenders one by one, often using long-range touch-kicks. This is a **very** different sort of tackling element than in American Football or Rugby.

A fun fact. Many kids like to chant little rhymes and repeat the last phrase, instead of repeating a single word. I grew up with this one:

Chal kabbadi aan me
Joota mare kaan me
Gir gaye maidan mein, maidan me, maidan me...

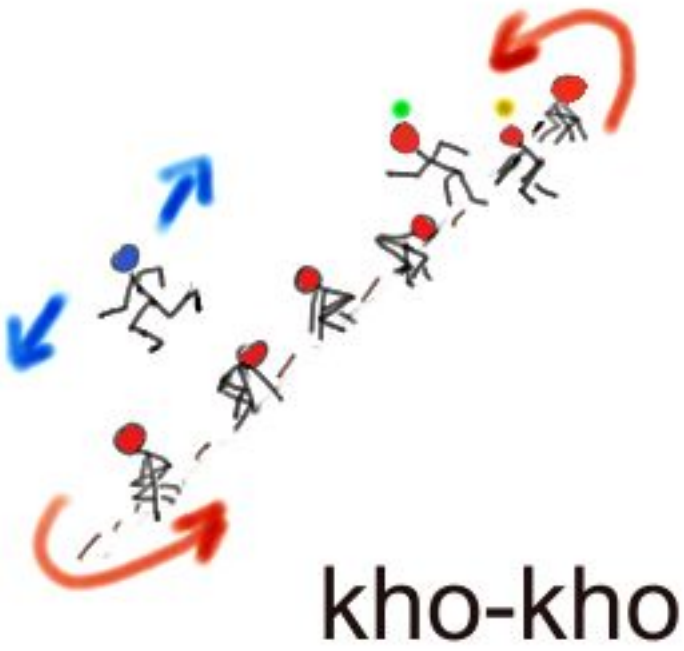
That translates to "Let's go play **kabaddi** in the courtyard, let's kick each other on the ear, let's fall down on the playing field, on the playing field, on the playing field..."

The little ditty captures the ethos of the game quite well.

Kho-Kho

Kho-kho is like reverse tag on crack. "It" (blue in the cartoon) runs around a line of other players, who squat in runners-start positions, alternating the directions they face. One of these players is chasing "It" at any given time. The rules: "It" can run in either direction,while

staying within a boundary. The chasers on the other hand, can only run in one direction (anti-clockwise at the moment in the picture). Their advantage: the current chaser can tag a squatter on the back with the word **kho** and have him take up the chase, and the new chaser has an opportunity to switch directions, but only once for his sprint, until the next **kho** (in the picture, a **kho** is in progress between the yellow dot and green dot guys in the picture). Effectively, chasers chase in a line-crossing relay. I grew up playing it as a one-versus-many game. When "It" is eventually caught (as is inevitable), the tagger becomes the new "It" and you play till you are exhausted. In more organized forms, it is played as a team sport, with one team sending a sequence of "It" runners and then taking their turn at being the chaser team.



One dynamic is worth mentioning. A just tagged chaser will try to defer his direction decision as much as possible (a few yards before he runs out of bounds). Much of the elegantly-minimal level of strategic thinking in the game hinges on your choice of direction on being **kho'ed**.

Lagori

Called **saat-pathar** (seven stones), **pittu** and several other names, **Lagori** is the most complex popular children's game in India, and is rather like Dodgeball, but more aggressive. A pile of 7 stones is arranged in the center of the court. The defending team has its players taking turns attempting to knock down the pile with a tennis ball, from a throwing crease line. While there are variations, the version I played had each person getting three chances. If you knock down the pile, **but** somebody in the opposing team catches the ball, your entire team is out and play switches sides. But if you knock it down and they **don't** catch it, **then** the real game begins. The defending team, which brought down the pile now goes about trying to stack it back up, while the attacking team attempts to hit the rebuilders with the tennis ball. The dynamic is **very** weird, as the rebuilders dart around near the scattered pile, trying to rebuild, and repeatedly scattering as the opposing team takes shots

at them. Both attackers and rebuilders tend to coordinate in emergent ways. There are no formal leaders. If the rebuilders manage to restack all 7, they win. If the attackers manage to hit every one of the rebuilders with the tennis ball before the restacking is complete, they win. Then they get their turn at attempting creative destruction.

The point to note about **Lagori** strategy is that you should attempt to disrupt the stack of 7 as **little** as possible. Preferably, just the top stone being knocked relatively close by, with a glancing blow from the ball. That will mean your rebuilding will be trivial. Blast all 7 all over the place with a powerful direct hit, and you are in for trouble rebuilding.

An aside: **Lagori** can turn brutally Lord-of-the-Flies-ish among tween boys, with the focus being on hurting with the tennis ball rather than the game strategy. We occasionally played a raw, bloody game called **maar-peet** (loosely: hit-and-beat-up) which dispensed with the complexities altogether and just had us attempting to hit each other with the tennis ball.

The Analysis

Let me elaborate on my themes from before, in the context of an Indians-in-the-workplace business metaphor, now that you have understood the games.

Individual-Group Tension: Indians are staggeringly good at very rapidly "reading" organizations. The one-vs.-many isn't, as you might think, a David-Goliath oppression narrative. We fit neither the collectivist ethos of the Sino-Japanese cultures, nor the teamwork-among-individualists culture of the West. Ours is a culture driven by a constant tension between sheathed-claws individual and wary collective, and we wear **both** hats at the same time. Our games are homage to a (culturally-natural I think) ability to appreciate that groups have more power, but with more constraints, while individuals can be more agile, but will eventually run out of energy. **Kho-kho** in particular, epitomizes this spirit. This same point is what struck Clifford Geertz about cockfighting in the culturally-somewhat-Indian Bali;

the cockfighting is largely about allowing individuals to read an apparently static culture. Geertz's famous article, Deep Play, explores this.Â The tag-line for ribbonfarm is "deep play for disruption." This strength also manifests itself as a weakness -- one that Raghunathan explores at length. We like figuring out how to beat a superficially "fair" system, just for the hell of it. When we play **for** a system or group, we tend to have a natural ability to **see** individuals through the eyes of the organization if necessary, a good managerial capability. In pathological form, there is a reason the Indian **babu** was the heart of the British Raj -- we make for some of the most creatively-obstructive petty bureaucrats.

Creative-Destruction: I have written before about the metaphysics of creative-destruction, but you don't have to get to the metaphysics to appreciate this point. More than any other culture, Indians truly and instinctively get the idea that there can be no growth without pain and acceptance of true destruction of some form. Not nice, nominal destruction, but **real** destruction, with hurt people and broken systems. We do not toe the line like Germans or Japanese (or seethe internally). We do not have a Gentleman's code of conduct like the British, or the locker-room backslapping camaraderie of the Americans. We are a collective of utterly primal individuals who maintain a facade of polite cooperation but are always driven by an itch to break and remake the system to our advantage. Nurtured right, this leads to good business-model innovation skills. As a pathology, it can turn into purely disruptive tendencies.

Breathlessness: This is one of the least appreciated Indian strengths, and is a product of an extraordinarily powerful tradition of live, public, think-on-your-feet argumentation, honed through centuries of debate among dueling scholar-warrior metaphysicians of Vedantic and Buddhist varieties. Amartya Sen explores the theme in The Argumentative Indian but I haven't read it, so I won't comment more on that. But the result is that Indians, in a business environment, have a natural inclination towards rapid, conceptual sparring and debate. We are rarely the best **doers** in most meeting rooms, but rapid and nimble mental gymnastics and reframing is a characteristic of strong Indian managers (as a pathology, it shows up as a tendency towards just-so analysis and sophistry). We don't need to go away and think things through before reacting to information.

Burst-Reversal-Energetics: We -- at least the privileged, **dalit-**exploiting upper castes -- have a much-deserved reputation for being a lethargic culture. But this is coupled with an aptitude for watchful opportunism and a sense of leverage and timing. Indians are (in a good way) naturally opportunistic workers. We try to minimize the effort required to achieve a desired outcome by just waiting and watching for the right opportunity. We are also amazingly good at switching contexts on a dime and suddenly going from sheer resistance to sheer support for something. Perhaps that's why we manage to run the world's largest, most unruly democracy, venal politicians and all. That's also perhaps why (besides English skills) we managed to bootstrap our economy into the global economy using Y2K as the opportunity.

Attrition: This is an attitude more than a strength -- Indians are perhaps a culture that is very much at home, philosophically, with natural processes of death and decay. Yes, in our games we count points upwards, but we like the fundamental dynamic to be a last-man-standing dynamic. There is also significant overlap between this trait and an Absurdist, Sisyphean and existentialist worldview. Why does it make for good management strengths? Because we accept disruption, change, Sisyphean rock-rolling and other business inevitabilities -- all attitudes that make for pragmatic management styles. At more immediate, day-to-day levels, we are probably far more willing and able to engage in bloody-minded conference-room brawling, take-no-prisoners debating, and zero-sum warfare. Not the pleasantest of attitudes. Today, most Indians in Western-style workplaces suppress any such tendencies, but the naturally cultural training is there in the background, and when Steven Covey and his bromides leave the room, we are always open to the possibility that the current situation is **not** a win-win one, and that there may be a need to fight and fight hard.

Leaderlessness: This might seem very odd as a comment about a culture which invented the most explicit caste system on the planet, but we are actually **not** very status conscious within caste or class boundaries, which is what matters since historically there wasn't much interpersonal interaction across boundaries anyway. Power flows fluidly (though not openly, except among kids) among individuals of the same nominal class in very situational and context-sensitive ways. Children talk back at parents, young men challenge the old. Labels such as CEO or VP matter little (though there may be as much ritualistic deference to nominal superiors as in China, this does not run deep. There is a lot more back-room insubordination). Students smart-mouth teachers. There is a whole cat-may-look-at-a-king quality to our approach to interpersonal relations.

I'll conclude (barring that pesky endnote) with a quote from an obituary of P. V. Narasimha Rao, a quintessentially Indian Prime Minister, by M. J. Akbar, a leading Indian journalist:

> [PVN's attitude] was the loneliness of a long-distance Brahmin runner, for the intellectual in him was also the Brahmin in him. He did not advertise his innate superiority of insight and scholarship. There was no need to. It was obvious. But he could never be one of the boys, if you see what I mean. Is that because he was always one of the adults?
>
> -- M. J. Akbar, writing on P. V. Narasimha Rao, Dec, 2004.

I'll leave you to interpret that as you will. Now for that endnote so I don't get skewered for my blunt opinions.

Endnote

My generalizations aren't intended as stereotypes, but as shorthand. I've known Indians who **don't** fit this mold and many non-Indians of all sorts who **do.** But our culture does tend to bring out these aspects of our personalities if we have them.

You might suspect that this is a Brahminical view masquerading as a pan-Indian view. The short answer: No. The reasons would take another 10,000 words, but this analysis applies to non-Hindu Indians and Dalits as much as it applies to the historically oppressive upper castes.

Yes, my language is gendered, because these are quintessentially boys' games in India. Girls do play them, but Indian women turn out to be the way they are due to other forces, that merit yet another essay.

No, I don't mean to be cultural-essentialist. The socialization/enculturation that Indians grow through is simply one among many forces that make us who we are, to the extent that we have certain characteristic cultural traits.

Yeah, we could talk about Cricket too. Another time.