Seeking Serendipity: The Inspiration Hunt of a Creative Professional

Amanda LeClerc

Amanda LeClerc is a graduate student in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. She holds an undergraduate degree in Art History and Cultural Studies from McGill University. Amanda has worked as a Customer Service Consultant for ZipLocal.com, an online search directory, and as an Account Executive at Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency. She is currently working with BiblioCommons in implementing new social discovery systems on public library catalogues. amanda.leclerc@utoronto.ca

Abstract

This paper presents findings from an exploratory ethnographic investigation into the inspiration seeking processes of a creative professional. The purpose of this paper is to document the hunt on both the micro (i.e. an individual instance) and macro (i.e. over the course of a project’s creative development) levels. Emphasis is placed on the critical role of serendipity in these processes, and on the similarities between inspiration gathering and the hobby of collecting. It is argued that serendipity is essential to the success of the inspiration hunt and to a project’s creative development. In concluding, the question is raised as to whether better design promotes or prevents these happenstance discoveries.

Introduction

In recent years an emerging discourse has developed on the significance of the creative economy – a sector concerned with the production and use of knowledge and information. For instance, famed Urban Studies theorist Richard Florida has called human creativity “the ultimate economic resource” (Florida, 2002, p.xiii). Increasingly, emphasis has been placed on innovation and creativity as fundamental to success in the ‘Information Age’. However, the Information Studies
discipline has yet to contribute to this discourse on creativity or to explore the creative process as information behaviour. This is likely due to the ephemeral nature of inspiration, which has been defined as a “sudden brilliant, creative, or timely idea” (“Inspiration”, 2004) or “stimulus” (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009). Information Studies has not yet recognized inspiration as a kind of information and inspiration seeking as an information act in response to an information need.

With these points in mind I have sought to examine this inspiration hunt, focusing specifically on the nature of this process and its reliance on serendipity versus strategy. An ethnographic approach was taken to document the online and offline activities of the subject. This approach is in accordance with the guidelines set out by Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, and Cui (2009) who advocate that ethnographers should not decide in advance to conduct an ethnography online or in the community, but rather should define the field of interest in terms of how it utilizes different channels of communication or technological locations. This study presents preliminary findings from the fieldwork and introduces some general considerations. I recognize inspiration hunting as comprising of two activities – active inspiration seeking and more passive inspiration receiving. One looks for inspiration but is also open to the inspiration that finds them. A connection is also suggested between information gathering and collecting, which can be defined as “the process of actively, selectively and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use” (Belk, 1995, p.141). Indeed, researchers in this field have noted the drive and passion with which collectors pursue desired objects (Lee & Trace, 2009). A typology of collecting has been proposed which includes the casual collector who builds their collection by adding items that appeal to them personally (Case, 2009). Similarities are evoked between this behaviour and the subject’s inspiration gathering. However, what most clearly emerges from the field is the critical role of serendipity to the inspiration hunt, where it is fundamental to inspiration gathering and to the overall development of the creative idea.

Setting and Methods

The purpose of this study is to document the inspiration hunt of a creative professional. McNamara Stradler is a self described animator, composer, writer, director and producer who happily agreed to be observed and interviewed for this study. McNamara is inspiration seeking for a personal project he is collaborating on with his wife, a professional photographer. The project is an art installation about matadors with animation and photographic components. He is currently looking for ideas for the formal treatment of the subject – i.e. the use of line, colour, aesthetic style etc. McNamara is mostly observed in his office, located in his downtown home. It is well stocked with physical sources of inspiration including books, comics, magazines, paintings, sculptures, cards, anatomical figures, figurines, and posters. His inspiration hunt occurs predominantly on the computer – browsing
personal and shared image files and websites; however, during the final visit he is observed at a local magazine store and well-known comic book shop.

Three visits are secured on three consecutive days. The first begins with a long initial semi-structured interview to understand McNamara’s definition of inspiration and how he perceives the inspiration seeking process. Each subsequent visit begins with a shorter semi-structured interview to establish what (if any) is McNamara’s inspiration seeking strategy or goal for the day, and to reflect on the perceived successes of the previous session. Initially, the intention is to follow these interviews with an hour-long unobtrusive observation session of the inspiration hunt. However, McNamara naturally takes a guided tour approach and narrates and discusses his process as he goes. This, in effect, extends the interview process and gives insight as to when McNamara is on task, as opposed to when he is distracted. The comfort level afforded by our personal relationship is invaluable in the transparency it provides in McNamara’s motivations and actions. The final visit is finished with a photographic inventory of his home office, online organizational schema, and inspiration sources.

Preliminary Findings

Planning for the Unplanned

While inspiration can be sought, an important aspect in the inspiration hunt is being receptive to the unexpected. Initial ideas are affirmed or rejected based on chance findings. McNamara allows the inspiration hunt to drive the creative concept and approach, rather than the other way round. He speaks to this when discussing his inspiration seeking strategy:

Coming up with a plan is assuming you have knowledge on the subject, which you don’t. So you realize that you need to find out about this stuff. So you throw out some keywords and see what you find. You trust that some kind of plan will come to you, some architecture for the idea (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009).

During observations and interviews McNamara speaks extensively of “stumbling upon things” that grab him. His experience at the local reference library illustrates the essential element of the unexpected to the inspiration hunt:

Well, you have your topic which already narrows creativity down tremendously… and then from there you keep an open mind and then let images and subjects and things wash over you. So, for example, at the library I was looking for images of the matador’s costume but not knowing what books would have images and what wouldn’t. So, I ordered a whole bunch of books. Sixty percent of them turned out to be all words, which wasn’t interesting. Other books though, they didn’t have pictures, they did have illustrations of some of the moves of the matador and that was interesting, and then another one had some great stuff that I wouldn’t have even known to look for and that was the point of view of the bull, the cone of its blind spot. And these things have turned out to be conceptually huge to the project and have totally changed my visual approach and possibly even the worthwhileness of this project. Its impact might have increased because of a few random schematics that I came across (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009).
These field notes illustrate some key insights about McNamara’s creative development process. First, that initial ideas or insights are simply starting points. For example, his initial ideas in terms of visual approach are completely changed with the discovery of “a few random schematics” (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009). He is not married to these early concepts. They will be re-examined during the project’s creative development, in light of new inspiration sources, and will be affirmed, evolved, or dismissed in the process.

This underscores the second point: the importance of being open and receptive during the inspiration hunt. McNamara, in fact, relies on this as part of his inspiration seeking strategy. He speaks of trusting that the architecture for his idea will come to him. Creative epiphanies can be sparked from unexpected (and unsought) sources. His trip to the reference library for images of the matador’s costume leads to the discovery of other inspiration that he “wouldn’t have known to look for” which fundamentally transforms the project (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009). This highlights the importance of flexibility and open mindedness while browsing for inspiration sources.

**Inspiration Seeking as Collecting “Cool”**

In examining inspiration seeking behaviours, similarities can be drawn between the selection of inspirational resources and the act of collecting. The inspiration hunt as the collecting of “cool” is evident during the observation sessions and is discussed during interviews with McNamara. He is observed on two occasions at his computer navigating files and Internet sites for inspiration.

As McNamara browses the online images he pauses, either briefly or for an extended period, on images that “jump out at him” (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009). As he does this he discusses what about them is capturing him. I watch as he frequently moves images, some explicitly unrelated to any current project, into personal folders, acknowledging that he rarely references these folders. When asked whether he considers himself a collector, he responds: “Absolutely. I have always considered myself a kind of librarian of coolness” (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009).

In one of our interviews McNamara discusses his inclination to collect these items that strike him:

Last year I was reading the Alexandria Quartet by Laurence Durrell, and he has passages that you want to write down in a journal and keep forever because they’re so romantic or they capture something about life in an amazingly poetic way… When I do come across some beautiful images or quotes I do like to keep them. Like I have a sticky note [on my computer] of quotes that I like. Do I reference them? No, not that often. What happens is when I go to paste in a new quote I then re-read them. So, to some degree, I think hoarding inspiration is a slightly hollow practice as you don’t really come back to them. But when I find someone I like, I’m pretty thorough. I’m kind of greedy. Who knows if I’ll be able to find this stuff again, if it’ll stay up [online] (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009).
Some noteworthy points emerge from this discussion. First, there is an element of compulsion evident in McNamara’s inspiration gathering, and similarities can be drawn with collecting in the preoccupation with acquisition and possession. For example, he is passionate about the Laurence Durrell passages and wants to have them forever. He even describes himself as “greedy” in his desire to acquire and keep these images, quotes, etc. that have touched him (Stradler, personal communication, November 12, 2009). His actions are similar to a casual collector who adds objects to their collection because of the subjective appeal of the objects.

It is also noteworthy that McNamara’s inspiration collecting is not functional. During the observation of his inspiration seeking for his current matador project, most of what he collects is related to other projects or to no project at all. He acknowledges that he rarely references the folders of images and records of quotes that he keeps. These items are not for ordinary use – artistic or otherwise – but are selected and acquired for their effect on him (i.e. because they are “cool” or “romantic” or “interesting”). The key point here is that McNamara’s inspiration gathering is not seen as collection building based not on the bringing together of like resources but on a level of engagement between himself and the objects.

The Inspiration Hunt – A Macro Level Model

During the final interview with McNamara I ask him to describe, in detail, the inspiration process for the matador project to date. McNamara’s description of the inspiration hunt and the project’s creative development suggests a distinct life cycle to the inspiration hunting process. It began after he and his wife attended a bullfight while on vacation in Spain.

**McNamara:** We both walked away shaken, very disturbed, yet moved by it. Then months later we decided we wanted to do a project together and this one was starting to take shape in our heads.

**A.L.:** What do you mean taking shape?

**McNamara:** Well, just from conversations and recollections of it, and it suggests certain things in our minds. Conversations. Our ideas were not only subject matter, but treatments – visual, sounds. So, it was at the back of my mind for a while…

**A.L.:** And were you looking for inspiration?

**McNamara:** No, I was stewing. I was stewing for a while… Then during the stewing process I got emailed by a friend some piece from Art of the Title Sequence – a website … that’s how I came across the Fall [i.e. a valuable inspiration source]…

One question was: how to treat the matador’s outfit? I was looking for a certain quality, but realized that I don’t know enough about their outfits. I can find some stuff online, but I wasn’t finding stuff that focused on the details of the outfit very easily. So naturally I thought I’d go to the reference library – that’s when I stumbled upon other books that had short stories about the bullfight, diagrams of the moves, and names that led to so many other ideas…

**A.L.:** How do you know when to stop inspiration seeking?

**McNamara:** You get reference weary – either you’ve got enough or you’re not finding what you are after. But you can’t spend any more time (Stradler,
From this discussion emerges a picture of the inspiration hunt at the macro level – the life cycle of McNamara’s inspiration seeking during creative development (see Figure 1).

The process begins with an initial idea for a project. This is followed by a stewing process during which the creative concept develops. During this period inspiration is passively rather than actively sought out. The concept gestates in response to internal (e.g. recollections) and external (e.g. conversations) inspiration sources. At some point McNamara begins the inspiration hunt – this period is marked by active inspiration seeking and responsiveness to unplanned inspiration discovery. The process ends when McNamara is satisfied with the sources he has collected or weary of an unfruitful information seeking process.

McNamara’s inspiration hunt is observed in three sessions in and out of the home. These sessions illustrate the disorderly nature of the inspiration hunt. Figure 2 is a map of McNamara’s inspiration hunt over a ninety-minute observation period at his home office. It starts on his computer and ends at his bookshelves.

The map illustrates key characteristics of McNamara’s inspiration hunt. The first is that the process can be relatively undisciplined. He carefully reads some sources, while casually skimming others. His stated task is to find inspiration for the aesthetic treatment of the matador project, yet he spends a good portion of his time seeking and collecting inspiration for unrelated and even undefined projects (i.e. no project is identified or he expresses that it is not for any existing project).

A second key point is that the inspiration hunt includes both inspiration seeking and inspiration reception. Inspiration is actively sought out through activities that include scanning a friend’s inspiration file, visiting the website of the creator of an inspiration source, searching on Wikipedia, and referencing his own bookshelves. However, inspiration also finds him and he is receptive to these unexpected sources of inspiration: for instance, a book ad appearing...
on the artist's website or an interesting story on Wikipedia.

Finally, it is interesting that there is a social or dialogic aspect to his hunt. He uses a friend's inspiration file as a starting point for his search. His hunt includes a conversation with myself about his conceptual ideas. This prompts him to gather resources from his bookshelves (including a book on Art Nouveau painter Alphonse Mucha) to illustrate some emerging ideas. These books are then incorporated into the workspace and, as a consequence, Art Nouveau is explicitly mentioned the next day as an inspiration source for the project.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of this study McNamara was observed collecting inspirational material that included Japanese anime, Russian propaganda art, Steam Punk illustrations, Mexican folk art, and Art Nouveau. I estimate that fifteen to twenty inspirational items were collected from five sources for three projects as well as personal acquisition. Only one source was collected due to active inspiration seeking for the project at hand, while the rest were stumbled upon by chance. These accounts of McNamara’s inspiration hunt demonstrate the critical role of unplanned sources of information to creative development. Moreover, this role is recognized by McNamara who consciously accepts (and even relies on) the serendipitous discovery of inspiration to evolve, dismiss, or affirm initial ideas, and to create an architecture for his project. The undisciplined and disorderly nature of the inspiration hunt at a micro level, where McNamara embraces unexpected findings as he meanders from source to source and back again, illustrates this acceptance. The life cycle of the inspiration hunt at a macro level illustrates that receptiveness to these unplanned discoveries informs the entire creative development process. The cultivation of the unplanned is, perhaps, inevitable as McNamara is – as a collector– compulsively drawn to inspect, acquire, and possess items that strike him as interesting.

These properties of the hunt have clear implications for catalogue design. Designers must be aware of the importance of serendipity to creative development. The reference library’s catalogue design did not effectively communicate which books were illustrated, and, as a result, McNamara browsed numerous text-based books that he would not have sought out otherwise. In this process he was struck by inspiration that he would not otherwise have known to seek out, inspiration that fundamentally changed his project. Would better design (for example transparency as to the number and quality of illustrations in each book) have promoted this serendipity or prevented it? Designers should consider whether their designs can facilitate serendipity or are only effective in facilitating inspiration seeking, as well as the repercussions of effective design with regard to serendipity. This is a challenge that should be further explored with the help of professional inspiration hunters.
References


