



Living in the Overlap

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Here's a bunch of stuff I haven't tried: *Project Runway*, *High School Musical*, *American Pie* movies, robot wars, molecular gastronomy, Halo 3, *Dancing With the Stars*, *Frisky Dingo*, sudoku, biopics, *House*, *Desperate Housewives*, Portishead, Fifty Cent, Dane Cook, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Life of Pi*, *Marley & Me*, *The Lovely Bones*, Augusten Burroughs, and Mitch Albom. I'm mildly curious about some; intensely disinterested about others. A lot of it might make a "sophisticated" individual uncomfortable. But my profession is identifying and establishing the

connections between people, culture, brands, stories, and products, and that means it's absolutely crucial that I know a little bit about all sorts of stuff that I may personally regard as crap.

It's become increasingly in vogue to point to our own escalated sophistication by distancing ourselves from that which we don't consume. By cobranding myself with *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, Richard K. Morgan, *This American Life*, and Werner Herzog, I can display important information about my ideals and aspirations

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(and I can then let my friends know all about my refined sensibilities, through the Friends and Community feature at Netflix). And while we see Dutch graphic designer Wim Crowel explain to us in the film *Helvetica* that he is a modernist and that his life is about being surrounded by modernism, from typefaces to furniture, I believe strongly that those of us who make things for other people need to embrace the existence of the “other.” Whether it’s post-modernism or pop culture, we need to consider the good, the bad, and the terrifying aspects of those others.

Pop culture is a rich source of information that can often be crucial for our work. When the public begins to compare and contrast the voting for *American Idol* with voting for the American president, that’s something we want to pay attention to. Dismissing this cultural data by sniffing “I don’t watch *American Idol*” isn’t a relevant response for designers, ethnographers, marketers, and other producers

of goods and services.

To correct this, I’d recommend that everyone rush out right now and read Chuck Klosterman’s entertaining and provocative 2003 book, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*. He’s got a wonderful ability to think deeply and communicate simply about intricate and previously unexamined aspects of popular culture. And while his topics (tribute bands, breakfast cereal, Internet porn, and the rest) are seemingly trivial, he finds deep cultural insight using those topics as a starting point.

This discussion of interests—striking a balance between what we like deeply and what we broadly know about—mirrors another discussion about skills. Even trying to identify with a particular community in the larger umbrella of interactions can be uncomfortable. IDEO has publicized its desire to hire only “T-shaped people” with broad skills that can be applied to multiple projects but deep

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expertise in at least one discipline. More than a decade ago I attended a lecture on innovation by technology forecaster Paul Saffo, in which he encouraged us to approach problems, and our own careers, with the soul of generalist and the heart of a specialist. Saffo's framework captures the messiness of the relationship between the general and special. For a few years I've been referring to this space as the "Overlap"; things that are not limited to one or the other but that reside in both.

Early in my career I struggled to market myself to colleagues and prospective employers as a generalist without a specialty, facing questions like "Are you a graphic designer? Are you a programmer? Are you a usability tester?" Many years later I have to fight off the specialties assigned to me. At a prominent ethnography conference in 2005, I was introduced to someone who asked me (in a specifically closed-end manner) if I was an anthropologist or a designer. Later at that same

event, a show-of-hands survey was conducted so that people could be identified according to a fixed list of nonoverlapping educational backgrounds or professional situations. I found myself unable to raise my hand. And still, when people refer to me as an ethnography expert, I feel nervous because that fails to fully capture what I do and what I think about.

One reaction to the blurring of discipline boundaries is the emergence of alternative job titles on business cards. Even as Web 1.0 fades into distant memory, I'm sure we all know a Product Management Rebel or Social Science Jedi. Of course, there are many opportunities for appropriate specialization (and associated branding). A pediatric oncologist and a urogynecologist solve very different problems, while still being doctors.

The ultimate profession in the Overlap is the interpreter. Interpreters are different from translators: Where translators

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work on converting a fixed written text from one language to another, interpreters work in real time, as people talk to each other. Many of the interpreters I've worked with are living in a different culture from the one in which they were born. Others were raised in a foreign culture but return "home" to work. They may have physical characteristics and accents from one of these cultures, but their social norms and sense of self are a chunky stew of every place they've lived.

While we love to organize things into labeled categories, forces such as globalization are complicating that. The same branded goods and services are available everywhere. People live and work in different countries and cultures, going back and forth between various "homes"

over the years. So even though McDonald's may evoke Americanness, it can hardly be considered American when it's in more than 100 countries. The answers to "Where are you from?" will only get more complicated. As the Overlap becomes the exception rather than the rule, the ones feeling the discomfort will be those who insist on residing outside it.

I propose the following *gedanken* experiment: Carry a (hypothetical) Sharpie around with you and get some practice in transforming categories into continua. Is there any Overlap possible between the north- and southbound lanes? Between HBO and Showtime? Between chocolate and vanilla? Straight and gay? Cash and credit? Paper and plastic?

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a boutique agency that helps companies discover and act on new insights about their customers and themselves.

Steve has been studying customer behavior and corporate culture for more than a decade and has advised dozens of clients on the creation of new products, services, and innovation processes.

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