

How I Became a Xenolinguist

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THE GRAND CONVERGENCE of psychedelics and technology came in the summer of 1998. I was a grad student at RPI in communication and rhetoric, fully indoctrinated in (mostly French) critical theory, semiotics, new media theory, and the history of communication technology. My task was to clarify my topic—the idea of a visual language—for a Ph.D. proposal. Instead of starting my bibliography, or some other sensible activity that would contribute to my academic progress, I began writing a novel, *The Maze Game*.

The fictional world had established itself well enough that I could enter it, look around, and ask questions of the characters. I asked for the details of how the game that is central to the novel was played. The answer arrived as a high-speed “download”—a blast of information concerning a visual language, Glide. I got the whole thing in a timeless instant: game, rules, architecture of the playing field, the 27 glyphs, how they behave as a visual language, and the myth of origin of the language. The game was played in mazes made of the visual language, Glide, taught to the characters by the hallucinogenic blue waterlily.

Glide presented itself in the story-world as an alien language. The glyphs of the language formed the patterns and physical structures on which the game was played. As the plot unfolded, it became evident that the Glide language was intricately involved at every level of the story: as the game maze architecture; as a secret code; as a literature. The forms of the language, especially that the signs moved and morphed, enabled new modalities of cognition.

When summer of 1998 was over, I did not have a visual language topic framed in terms of a semiotic or new media theory. I had instead a model of a gesturing, transforming linguistic system, suggesting, in its grammar and syntax, that new forms of writing, of psychedelic origin, enabled by the capability of the computer to animate signs and symbols, could offer novel ways of expressing meaning. The glyphs, laid out statically, on a two-dimensional surface (like all our natural language written forms) formed webby mazes. Animated, the glyphs transform, linking and unlinking with each other. A Glide maze seemed like a new kind of circuit operating

with many points of change and connection, an abstraction of the organic, constantly shifting circuitry of the brain through which electrical and chemical signals pulse, where myriads of connections are formed and broken in complex patterns, constructing and projecting a world around and inside us.

In the *The Maze Game*, the characters undergo an initiation, where they find their focus, their unique purpose in life, by ingesting the sacrament of the psychedelic Lily, invoking its guidance, and making their way through a Glide maze. Taking a cue from the Glides, who, in the narrative, were taught the Glide language while under the influence of the Lily, I made a consequential decision—to explore the language more deeply, I would follow the Glide’s path into the maze, ingesting a psychedelic sacrament in search of knowledge about the maze itself. At this point, I became a character in my own story, while in a reciprocal (or self-reflexive) move, Glide lifted itself out of the story world to be considered and developed in “real life.” I had written a story, and the story was now writing me. I became a scribe and a xenolinguist, deciphering a language from the ancient future.

A series of software applications emerged from this process of psychedelic self-exploration. First, the glyphs were animated. The Collabyrinth, an interactive glyph editor, was programmed for combining, animating, and translating glyph formations.

Next was the Glide Oracle [www.academy.rpi.edu/glide], which involved the translation of approximately 1100 glyph pairs, and 729 glyph transformations. These translations were useful in exposing the archetypal and poetic dimensions of the language. It also taught me that future efforts to understanding Glide needed to move away from natural language which provided too constricted a reducing valve on “language at large,” to re-tool Huxley’s metaphor.

The language asked to be confronted on its own terms. What needed to be translated was not the language, but the brain/mind, to adapt to language constructed on different sensory ratios. Whether such rewiring of our plastic neurons is possible by exposure to new forms of



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language, is purely speculative, but would make an interesting scientific investigation.

The next application, LiveGlide, involved the ability to write in three dimensions interactively with continuously moving forms.

LiveGlide interface.

States of extended perception were used in the conception, design, and implementation of LiveGlide software, in practice and performance, and in learning how to read what I was writing. Primarily, psychedelics provided the means to emerge from the cocoon of natural language into what could be understood as both a pre-linguistic state of direct apperception of the world around and inside us, and as a post-linguistic (post-natural language) realm of evolutionary forms of language, concomitant with the sense of consciousness expanded into a novel, if temporary, evolutionary state.

Glide language became, with practice, a direct readout of the process of the communication with the Other. The fluidly shifting state of the relationship, the moods, the qualities of perception and attention, the steadiness of awareness is palpable when I read the writing. As a deliberate experiment in neural plasticity, trying to rewire the brain-mind from the inside out, across multiple states of reality, I launched into ontological engineering.

Psychedelics can transport one beyond the veil of natural language, into the unspeakable. This unspeakability is often described as a communication deficit, where natural language is viewed as insufficient to convey the realities of the psychedelic sphere. I view this “bug” as a “feature,” an opportunity to become aware of the other channels of communication, both those available at baseline, such as body language, and those opened or enhanced in the psychedelic experience.

When I have folded the maps of natural language, the mindbogglingly novel territory of the psychedelic sphere shines forth, nameless, but not unknowable. LiveGlide becomes for me a kind of biomechanical living language, algorithmic in its means, but moved and changed entirely by my own human gestures on the interface, playing over one hundred parameters of expressive possibilities, a vast combinatorial phase space to play in. And in turn, I’m played by... This sense of the vastness of possibility, when experienced under conditions of extended perception and cognition, parallels the vastness and complexity of receptor space, the chemical architecture of consciousness, as studied by Tom Ray [<http://life.ou.edu/pubs/Tucson04/>]

In the psychedelic sphere, epistemology’s an extreme

sport. I use LiveGlide as a noetic practice. I am learning about knowing, but the categories of Knower and Known, Self and Other, taken for granted in our baseline (natural language) grammar of first and third persons, can radically reconfigure themselves in extended, merged, or blended states of being. Knowing can be re-formed to include not only linguistic knowledge, and gut-level feelings of certainty, but knowing by doing, and knowing by being where I know you and you know me because we have in an experiential sense become each other. At all mind-states, the questions arise: Who writes? Who reads?

Who understands? What, for that matter, is a who? Then come the magical moments when communication shades into communion, when Self and Other, and reading and writing become one, in a fluid dance of transformation.

The question of the Other’s ontological status—is this truly an Other, outside of myself, or is the Other an unrecognized portion of myself, so strange, so much more than what I think of as my Self at baseline, so wholly unexpected and so endowed with novelty that I perceive it as alien—is moot. Either interpretation leads to conclusions that require considerable re-drawing of the maps of human nature and experience. With these combined technologies—LiveGlide, a language whose writing is made possible by the CPU, and psychopharmacology that brings both the Other and new linguistic phenomena into view—a call is placed, across the chasm between realities; a response comes with considerable joy that contact has been made. I dance toward an unspeakable edge, willing to be transformed by the unknowable into the unknown.

As to my own research agenda with LiveGlide, I would like to collaborate with a neuroscientist in building a device that would take a subset of my own brain signals, and map them to various parameters of LiveGlide. I believe this could provide a more aesthetic visualization with which to monitor and record the changes occurring in brain states, link them to internal states, and, in a biofeedback loop, potentially develop the ability to move in and out of different brain states. This would be particularly interesting in studying changes throughout the trajectory of a psychedelic experience, from onset, through peak, and back to baseline. The LiveGlide software is built to take generic MIDI signals from any source. The display technology and control mapping interface is already built; what is needed is a partnership with neuroscientific expertise. •

More on Glide, LiveGlide, and Xenolinguistics can be found at: <http://mazerunner.wordpress.com> and <http://www.academy.rpi.edu/glide>

At this point,

I became

a character

in my own story...

I had written a

story, and the story

was now

writing me.”