

The Real Nature of the Emerging Attention Economy

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Augmented version with additional Powerpoint slides and commentary

Introduction:

As I was waiting to check in at the San Diego Grand Hyatt before the E-tech conference, on March 6, 2006. I began laughing out loud at the murals everywhere of romanticized 18th-century English country scenes. What are they doing in a recently built hotel in 21st-century San Diego? Listening to the talks of Rael Dornfest, Seth Goldstein, Linda Stone and David Sifry gave me a similar feeling of something slightly out of whack. For the first bits of each of their talks — even two-thirds in Sifry’s case I was excited. I thought “Yes! This is just what I have been saying for nearly 20 years.” (After all, it’s been 14 years since my article on what I then called “the Attention Society” appeared in Esther Dyson’s *release 1.0*, and by the end of that year I had signed a book contract for a volume to be titled *The Attention Economy*.) Had the speakers gone on in that vein, I’m not sure I would have had much to say now.

Not to worry. As I kept listening, each of the talks went off the rails, in my opinion. Half a loaf is better than none, and I am encouraged that at last the Attention Economy idea has received a measure of recognition. Still, the problems with the talks has helped me see the why I have had such problems with my book. My sense is that even though this conference is using the new paradigm in its title, the conference itself and most of the speakers haven’t made the leap. To put it oversimply, from my viewpoint, you (Internet ‘geeks’ in the audience) don’t know who you are, what world you are living in, or even what you are trying to accomplish. You are certainly not alone in this. To use a clumsy metaphor, you are butterflies — or at least moths — who think you are still caterpillars. Caterpillars eat the tender leaves of plants, and you still think you must live on the green stuff, but butterflies live on nectar. The currency you should be aiming for is the more ethereal-seeming mental currency of attention.

These are not easy things to grasp, so I have come up with what I hope is a better way of explaining it, one I hope that some of you will either get, or at least keep in mind, keep thinking of, keep chewing on.

The Real Nature of the Emerging
Attention Economy:
Seen As a New Level in the
Massively Multiplayer Game
Known as Western
Culture

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An Economy Most Generally.....

is a massively multiplayer

SINGLE-LEVEL game

that involves some kind of passing of

scarce entities

between players

so as to knit all players intricately together

Economic History Is a Multi- Level Game

First Level

FEUDAL

800-1200

2 Levels

FEUDAL

800-1200

MARKET-MONEY-INDUSTRIAL

1650-1980

3 Levels

FEUDAL

800-1200

MARKET-MONEY-INDUSTRIAL

1650-1980

ATTENTION
ECONOMY

Note that the time between the feudal level in full control and the next Market Money Industrial system is centuries long.

However, the pace of change has speeded up many, many fold since then. So we are probably well on the way to the dominance of the latest system already.

The next slide reveals how different the different systems are , according to a measure I have devised, which is explained on the following slide. I arbitrarily set the value for the Feudal system at 1. I expect the measure to hold only very roughly, but the difference between levels is still impressive.

3 Levels

FEUDAL

800-1200 [1]

MARKET-MONEY-INDUSTRIAL

1650-1980 [20,000]

ATTENTION ECONOMY

[30,000,000,000]

TPI coefficient of Economies

Transactions per Lifetime ×
Pool of people Interacted with ×
Intensity of Interaction

Transactions

- In feudal economy, they are events like marriages, oaths of fealty and battles
- In MMI system they are chiefly ordinary buying and selling
- In Attention Economy, every time anyone pays attention to a new person or expression that is essentially a new transaction

Intensity of Interaction

This is an indication of how much each interaction changes the person interacting, on average.

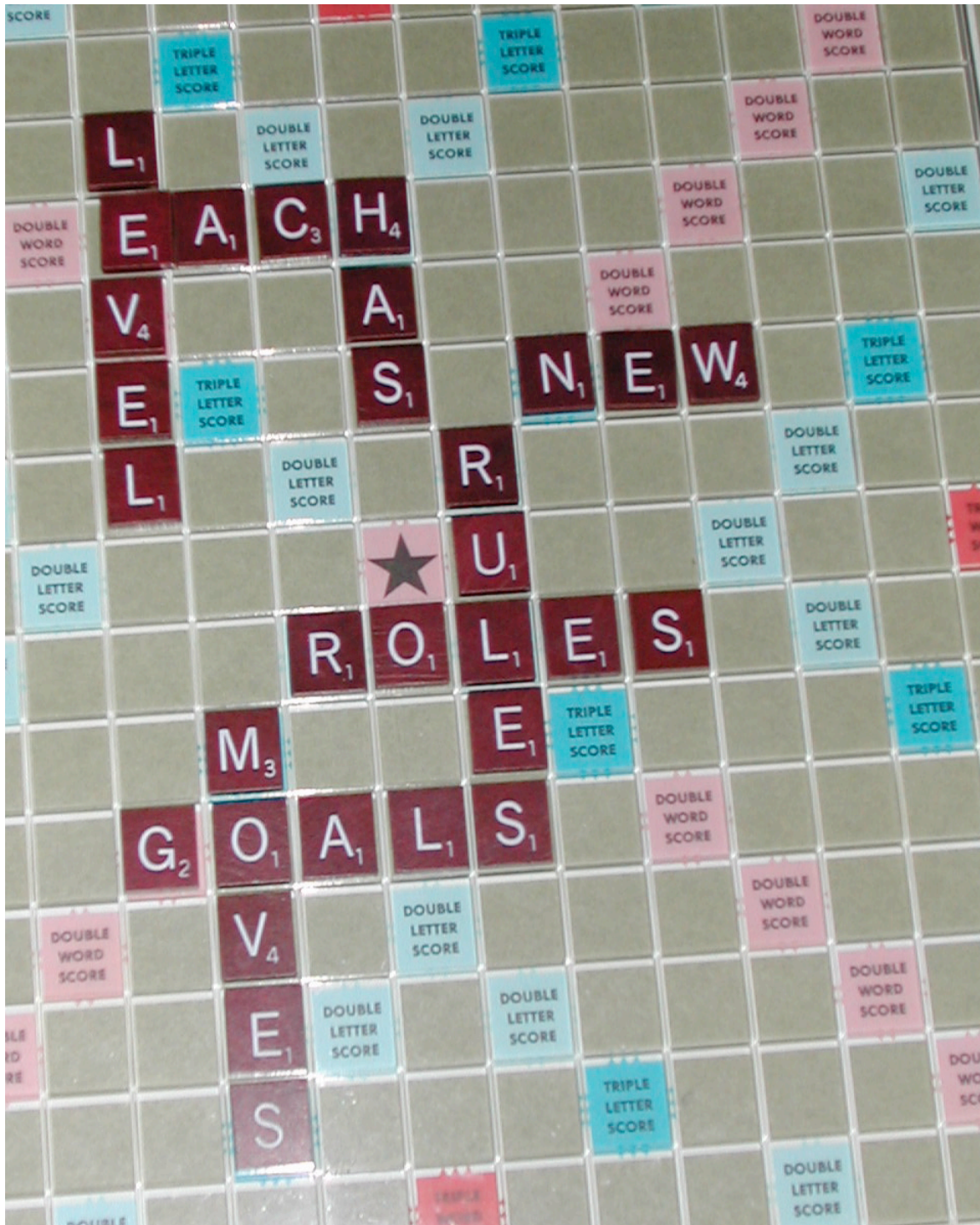
Pool of people transacted with

This is the number of people one may possibly conduct a transaction with, depending on both the size of the total population affected, and range of possible actions.

When do we reach a new level?

**When enough of the players in
current level reach their (implicit)
goals.**

**That is, a prior level ends with
success, not failure.**



Each new level has new “rules,” “roles,” “moves,” “goals,” (and values)

But

THERE IS NO
GAME DESIGNER



New level game emerges from...

- basic human proclivities,
- capacities
- and inventiveness
- in environment created by prior level,
- and its lacks,
- openings,
- partially utilized capacities
- oversights
- and limitations

2 changes of level

| | |
|---|--|
| Feudal ➡ MMI | MMI ➡ Attention Economy |
| Success: Security | Success: Material abundance |
| Openings: ungoverned cityspaces Safe travel; Mostly no slavery | Openings: High school; Broadcasting; Publishing Internet |

2 changes of level, cont'd.

| | |
|--|---|
| Feudal ➡ MMI | MMI ➡ Attention Economy |
| Lack: material goods | Lacks: chance to get attention; Personal uniqueness, self-expression |
| Affordances: Monasteries and the technology they created | Affordances: “Info-tech” consumer goods |

Aspects of 3 Levels

| FEUDAL | MMI | ATTENTION EC |
|--|--|---|
| <p><i>Goals(scarcity):</i> Loyalty, Feoffdoms Security</p> | <p><i>Goals (scarcity):</i> Material goods, money, jobs</p> | <p><i>Goals (scarcity):</i> Attention from others</p> |
| <p><i>Roles:</i> Knights, Serfs</p> | <p><i>Roles:</i> Owner, Worker/Consumer</p> | <p><i>Roles:</i> Star, Fan</p> |
| <p><i>Moves:</i> Obtaining feoffs by winning battles, pledging loyalty or marriage</p> | <p><i>Moves:</i> Organizing production, selling at a profit, working a job, Buying at a good price</p> | <p><i>Moves:</i> Performing, Creating Seeking an audience, Paying attention</p> |

Cycles and Structure

| FEUDAL | MMI | ATTENTION ECONOMY |
|--|--|---|
| Vassals → Battles won → More vassals | Work → Earnings → <u>Goods</u> Capital → Profits → More Capital | Attention → Memory → More Attention |
| Each serf has one lord | Each worker has one employer | Each fan has many stars |

**NOTE THAT EACH
LEVEL HAS ITS OWN,
DIFFERENT KIND OF
CYCLE AND
DIFFERENT STRUCTURE
They are
incompatible!**

II.

WHAT IS
ATTENTION?

Or, how does attention work as an economic entity in this new kind of economy?

Key points about attention

A. It is scarce, and always will be.

B. It is very desirable.

C. While having only one body limits how much food you can eat or how many cars you can drive, nothing limits the amount of attention you could absorb, if you could get it.

The penumbra of “paying attention” includes:

Heeding, listening, seeing, etc., doing what is wanted, serving, waiting for or waiting on, recognizing, reputed, honoring, granting meaning to, deriving meaning from, learning, etc.

Paying attention amounts to temporarily (and thereby permanently) allowing another to shape how your mind works.

Is Attention about Money or is it
about Time?

Short answer:

NO

Attention, like all other human actions , takes place in time, of course, but it is not particularly about time. Rather it has to do with the degree of mental reshaping required to be attentive to that a particular expression, human-made thing, etc.

Likewise, as long as we live partly in two systems, having enough attention allows one to get anything one wants, including, certainly money. That is why acknowledged stars tend to be extremely well paid.

However, paying someone money cannot guarantee you have their attention. Thus there is no symmetry, even now, between money and attention.

Who owns your attention?

Right now, in part, I do.

And, if you are paying attention now, I will continue to own some part of your attention, until you get senile.

Sorry.

We can think of having attention as owning a kind of property. This property is located in the minds of those who have paid you attention.

Finding meaning in life comes from
sharing meanings with others.
That can only happen if you get
some of their attention.

In the introduction to the E-tech conference, the organizer, Rael Dornfest, of O'reilly Publishing, suggested that the purpose of the various kinds of software and websites to be discussed is mainly to make “us” more “productive.” So....

What is “being productive” about?

- A. Being productive means being able to increase amount of attention one gets.
- B. Since total attention *per capita* is limited, net productivity cannot rise beyond a certain point.
- C. Developing new tech tools is largely about seeking stardom in geekdom

How Much Attention Can You
Expect?

Suppose you do the attention
equivalent of writing one book a
year.

And suppose everyone “reads”
one “book” a year.

Then
The average “book” will have one
“reader.”

In actuality, we can pay attention to more, say even 300 books per year.

So the average audience you can expect is 300 for your year's work.

If that is in site design, it's ...

NOT
the next Google!