

Humans, Computers, and Cognition
Response Paper Week Four: Carroll

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The Parrot and the Hoopoe

Ware, Colin. "Design as Applied Perception." In John M. Carroll, ed., *HCI Models, Theories, and Frameworks: Toward a Multidisciplinary Science*. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2003, 11-26.

Pirolli, Peter. "Exploring and Finding Information." In Carroll, 157-191.

One of these articles is about the effects of human perception on design and theories of design. The other addresses models of information-seeking. Each article is interesting and relevant in itself. Both can be made relevant to each other, but only just, under the heading of "Interaction, Human-Computer." Sadly, this category is a little broad to be useful; on further reflection, it is too broad even to be very interesting, much as "Birds, African" does not do justice to the parrot and the hoopoe eyeing each other warily on the same branch. And there is a wariness in the juxtaposition, a felt uneasiness. Why?

You might argue that Miller's "informavore" was once a carnivore, or took at least a healthy interest in the activities of carnivores; that at bottom all of his complicated perceptual and perceptual-processing systems are about sussing out snakes on a plain; that he built up his brain with tools he made himself (*mode d'emploi*: bash in other brainpans)—you might see a pattern, one that perhaps takes on its own specially-sour appeal when the little woman is complaining that you never want to clean up the house but instead spend all your time going hunting with your buddies and What's. This. Hairdoingonyourcollar but—

But you'd be taking squawk for speech, wouldn't you? A pattern of sound for conscious language? And if not, how would you know? Ask the parrot? Suppose you came in late and missed the change in your reading assignment one week, failing to grasp that two articles weren't relevant to each other in any significant way? Who'd guess that the parrot had been hoopoe'd by chance?

In short, the phenomenon of pattern recognition often limits the perception of patterns in ways hard for a hominid to judge. And the pattern doesn't stop there, but repeats itself when you see a snake under every stone or a mountain in every molehill. Once again, model is metaphor. Deciding that information search is like hunting is all well and good until you realize that the dumbest animal uses hundreds of cues—the position of light, the sough of the wind, the black fan a certain acacia makes against a certain mountain—that have no equivalent in the strip-mined search environment. Better not to hunt at all, better to serve a single savory result like a steaming steak on a platter—perhaps, and carnivores

differ on this point, with but one drop of blood glistening on the plate, a sort of frisson-producing reminder of all the work involved in turning moo to meal and exactly the kind of phenomenon (a crown of glorious and meaningless aesthetic frills) that recommended the hoopoe to Solomon and makes us think that a little bird could tell us anything.