

Breakthrough innovation as an intimate, dance-like engagement

The Magic Eyes® of innovation: Ontological implications, II

The Magic Eyes® metaphor suggests that breakthrough innovation is an intimate interaction with an underlying reality



Ok,” you might be thinking, “so why the sensual dance photo ... a bit provocative, wouldn’t you say?” Let me try to explain, but first some context to lead us into it.

In the previous essay, I suggested that individuals participating in the act of breakthrough innovation might be viewed as either *imposing their will* or *discovering a hidden reality*. In considering these two options as an either-or dichotomy, I argued on behalf of the perspective that Serial Innovators (SIs) in practice discover a hidden or underlying reality that others do not discern.

In the present essay, I go further, transitioning from this either-or dichotomy to a richer, more nuanced way of understanding the underlying ontological implications of the Magic Eye® metaphor of breakthrough innovation – individuals participating in the act of breakthrough

innovation as *intimately interacting with a hidden, underlying reality*.

While “innovators-as-imposers” hold an ontology in which there is nothing to discover and “innovators-as-discoverers” hold an ontology in which there is something external to the innovator to discover, *“innovators-as-intimate-interactors” hold an ontology in which there is something external to the innovator that can, should, and will be engaged with intimately*. I now turn to an important implication of this ontological perspective and the SIs who hold it.

A metaphor: the innovator as an expert ballroom dancer

The behaviors and actions of “innovators-as-intimate-interactors” display an uncanny resemblance to the behaviors and actions of an expert ballroom dancer. Let’s explore and unpack this metaphor (an expert ballroom dancer) within a metaphor (viewing Magic Eye® images).

First, both expert ballroom dancer and exemplar breakthrough innovator interact with their “partner” (dance partner in the first instance, reality – their products, their colleagues, their management, their customers, the marketplace, etc. – in the second) with multiply mediated, intimate interactions. Ballroom dancers rely not only on sight, but also touch (including the use of pressure and resistance between partners to lead and follow) and sound. The best innovators also use multiple senses – not just sight, but also touch, sound, taste and smell – as the situation demands. While we typically restrict such behavior to our thinking about industrial designers, exemplar technical innovators do not limit themselves to less than the complete set of senses necessary. And, as we considered in our discussion of mediated interactions in Essay #7, breakthrough innovators do not stop with these senses. They engage reality intimately using all of the technical, business, and other seemingly unrelated mediating tools.

The best breakthrough innovators engage with reality in a manner resembling that of an expert ballroom dancer engaging with their partner of many years – an intimate, dynamic, and multi-sensory interaction.

Next, as we’ve already discussed at some length in earlier essays, exemplar innovators discern subtle patterns embedded within massive amounts of complex information. Ballroom dancers do so, as well. Relying on all of the ➤

sensory information that they gather, they see how the dance is progressing.

Yet, both expert dancer and exemplar innovator go further. They both have the insight to understand what actions they can take to lead to future possibilities. The expert dancer sees where they can take their partner, both across the floor and in terms of working within their partner's strengths and limitations. Similarly, the exemplar innovator sees where they can take their products, their colleagues, their management, their customers and the marketplace, within some very real constraints. They have the vision to discern future possibilities within these constraints that have not yet played out.

Finally, in each case, those possibilities and visions are acted upon. The expert dancer leads their partner, but not just on a trajectory that is fixed and then implemented. They continue to sense, discern, adapt and adjust – with multiply mediated, intimate interactions. The exemplar innovator leads their products, colleagues, management, customers, and markets, yet not just on their originally planned trajectory. As they see the act of commercialization play out, they continue to sense, discern, adapt and adjust – with multiply mediated, intimate interactions.ⁱⁱ

Just like the expert ballroom dancer, who is neither static nor rigid, and who continues to dance on with their partner,

the exemplar innovator continues to intimately interact with this hidden, underlying reality.

In doing so, the world is different than what it would have been had they not acted. ■

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ⁱ As a reminder, from the previous essay, I defined ontology as the study of what exists. It deals with “whether or not a certain thing, or more broadly entity, exists.” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/#Ont>; the entry on ontology in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

ⁱⁱ This is where our Magic Eye® metaphor falls a bit short, which is why I turn to the expert ballroom dancers as a metaphor. We could have accommodated the insights contained in this paragraph in our Magic Eye® metaphor by suggesting that exemplar innovators have the power to interact with – that is, literally move – the dots in the Magic Eye® image in order to send the embedded image in the direction that they desire. Since ballroom dancing more readily illustrates this insight, while Magic Eye® images fall short in this regard, we turn to this other metaphor to illustrate this important insight. Note, though, that the Magic Eye® metaphor provides much richer and more nuanced insight than the ballroom dancer metaphor in some other key areas of application. Together, they provide a more comprehensive window on what occurs during the act of breakthrough innovation.

“On the Epistemology of Innovation: How Breakthrough Innovators Connect the Dots” is a series of brief, occasional essays addressed to executives, managers, and technologists responsible for innovation in industry. Its purpose is to challenge readers to reflect broadly and deeply on the practice of innovation – in particular on how innovators come to know what to do today – in order to succeed commercially in the future. Essays are available without charge at the University of Illinois’ digital archive at <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/27667>. The discussion group at <http://epistemology-of-innovation.com> is a place to provide feedback and dialog with the author and others regarding these essays, as well as to register to receive notice of new essays as they are issued.